



THE WOMAN AT THE STORE (1912)

By Katherine Mansfield

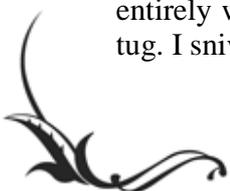
All that day the heat was terrible. The wind blew close to the ground; it rooted among the tussock grass, slithered along the road, so that the white pumice dust swirled in our faces, settled and sifted over us and was like a dry-skin itching for growth on our bodies. The horses stumbled along, coughing and chuffing. The pack horse was sick—with a big, open sore rubbed under the belly. Now and again she stopped short, threw back her head, looked at us as though she were going to cry, and whinnied. Hundreds of larks shrilled; the sky was slate colour, and the sound of the larks reminded me of slate pencils scraping over its surface. There was nothing to be seen but wave after wave of tussock grass, patched with purple orchids and manuka bushes covered with thick spider webs.

Jo rode ahead. He wore a blue galatea shirt, corduroy trousers and riding boots. A white handkerchief, spotted with red—it looked as though his nose had been bleeding on it—was knotted round his throat. Wisps of white hair straggled from under his wideawake—his moustache and eyebrows were called white—he slouched in the saddle, grunting. Not once that day had he sung “I don't care, for don't you see, My wife's mother was in front of me!...” It was the first day we had been without it for a month, and now there seemed something uncanny in his silence. Hin rode beside me, white as a clown; his black eyes glittered, and he kept shooting out his tongue and moistening his lips. He was dressed in a Jaeger vest, and a pair of blue duck trousers, fastened round the waist with a plaited leather belt. We had hardly spoken since dawn. At noon we had lunched off fly biscuits and apricots by the side of a swampy creek.

“My stomach feels like the crop of a hen,” said Jo. “Now then, Hin, you're the bright boy of the party—where's this 'ere store you kep' on talking about. ‘Oh, yes,’ you says, ‘I know a fine store, with a paddock for the horses and a creek runnin’ through, owned by a friend of mine who'll give yer a bottle of whisky before 'e shakes hands with yer.’ I'd like ter see that place—merely as a matter of curiosity—not that I'd ever doubt yer word— as yer know very well—*but ...*”

Hin laughed. “Don't forget there's a woman too, Jo, with blue eyes and yellow hair, who'll promise you something else before she shakes hands with you. Put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

“The heat's making you balmy,” said Jo. But he dug his knees into the horse. We shambled on. I half fell asleep, and had a sort of uneasy dream that the horses were not moving forward at all—then that I was on a rocking-horse, and my old mother was scolding me for raising such a fearful dust from the drawing-room carpet. “You've entirely worn off the pattern of the carpet,” I heard her saying, and she gave the reins a tug. I snivelled and woke to find Hin leaning over me, maliciously smiling.



“That was a case of all but,” said he. “I just caught you. What's up? Been bye-bye?”

“No!” I raised my head. “Thank the Lord we're arriving somewhere.”

We were on the brow of the hill, and below us there was a whare roofed with corrugated iron. It stood in a garden, rather far back from the road—a big paddock opposite, and a creek and a clump of young willow trees. A thin line of blue smoke stood up straight from the chimney of the whare; and as I looked a woman came out, followed by a child and a sheep dog—the woman carrying what appeared to me a black stick. She made gestures at us. The horses put on a final spurt, Jo took off his wideawake, shouted, threw out his chest, and began singing, “I don't care, for don't you see. ...” The sun pushed through the pale clouds and shed a vivid light over the scene. It gleamed on the woman's yellow hair, over her flapping pinafore and the rifle she was carrying. The child hid behind her, and the yellow dog, a mangy beast, scuttled back into the whare, his tail between his legs. We drew rein and dismounted.

“Hallo,” screamed the woman. “I thought you was three' awks. My kid comes runnin' in ter me. ‘Mumma,’ says she, ‘there's three brown things comin’ over the ‘ill,’ says she. An' I comes out smart, I can tell yer. ‘They'll be’ awks,’ I says to her. Oh, the' awks about ‘ere, yer wouldn't believe.”

The “kid” gave us the benefit of one eye from behind the woman's pinafore—then retired again.

“Where's your old man?” asked Hin.

The woman blinked rapidly, screwing up her face.

“Away shearin'. Bin away a month. I suppose yer not goin' to stop, are yer? There's a storm comin' up.”

“You bet we are,” said Jo. “So you're on your lonely, missus?”

She stood, pleating the frills of her pinafore, and glancing from one to the other of us, like a hungry bird. I smiled at the thought of how Hin had pulled Jo's leg about her. Certainly her eyes were blue, and what hair she had was yellow, but ugly. She was a figure of fun. Looking at her, you felt there was nothing but sticks and wires under that pinafore—her front teeth were knocked out, she had red pulpy hands, and she wore on her feet a pair of dirty Bluchers.

“I'll go and turn out the horses,” said Hin.

“Got any embrocation? Poi's rubbed herself to hell!”

“Arf a mo!” The woman stood silent a moment, her nostrils expanding as she breathed. Then she shouted violently. “I'd rather you didn't stop. ... You *can't*, and there's the end of it. I don't let out that paddock any more. You'll have to go on; I ain't got nothing!”



“Well, I’m blest!” said Jo, heavily. He pulled me aside. “Gone a bit off’er dot,” he whispered. “Too much alone, *you know*” very significantly. “Turn the sympathetic tap on’er, she’ll come round all right.”

But there was no need—she had come round by herself.

“Stop if yer like!” she muttered, shrugging her shoulders. To me—” I’ll give yer the embrocation if yer come along.”

“Right-o, I’ll take it down to them.” We walked together up the garden path. It was planted on both sides with cabbages. They smelled like stale dish-water. Of flowers there were double poppies and sweet-williams. One little patch was divided off by pawa shells—presumably it belonged to the child—for she ran from her mother and began to grub in it with a broken clothes-peg. The yellow dog lay across the doorstep, biting fleas; the woman kicked him away.

“Gar-r, get away, you beast the place ain’t tidy. I ’aven’t ’ad time ter fix things to-day—been ironing. Come right in.”

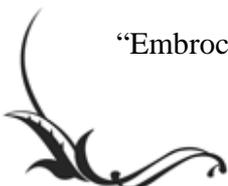
It was a large room, the walls plastered with old pages of English periodicals. Queen Victoria’s Jubilee appeared to be the most recent number. A table with an ironing board and wash tub on it, some wooden forms, a black horsehair sofa, and some broken cane chairs pushed against the walls. The mantelpiece above the stove was draped in pink paper, further ornamented with dried grasses and ferns and a coloured print of Richard Seddon. There were four doors—one, judging from the smell, let into the “Store,” one on to the “backyard,” through a third I saw the bedroom. Flies buzzed in circles round the ceiling, and treacle papers and bundles of dried clover were pinned to the window curtains. I was alone in the room; she had gone into the store for the embrocation. I heard her stamping about and muttering to herself: “I got some, now where did I put that bottle?... It’s behind the pickles... no, it ain’t.” I cleared a place on the table and sat there, swinging my legs. Down in the paddock I could hear Jo singing and the sound of hammer strokes as Hin drove in the tent pegs. It was sunset. There is no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque—it frightens—as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw. Sitting alone in the hideous room I grew afraid. The woman next door was a long time finding that stuff. What was she doing in there? Once I thought I heard her bang her hands down on the counter, and once she half moaned, turning it into a cough and clearing her throat. I wanted to shout “Buck up!” but I kept silent.

“Good Lord, what a life!” I thought. “Imagine being here day in, day out, with that rat of a child and a mangy dog. Imagine bothering about ironing. *Mad*, of course she’s mad! Wonder how long she’s been here—wonder if I could get her to talk.”

At that moment she poked her head round the door.

“Wot was it yer wanted?” she asked.

“Embrocation.”



“Oh, I forgot. I got it, it was in front of the pickle jars.”

She handed me the bottle.

“My, you do look tired, you do! Shall I knock yer up a few scones for supper! There's some tongue in the store, too, and I'll cook yer a cabbage if you fancy it.”

“Right-o.” I smiled at her. “Come down to the paddock and bring the kid for tea.”

She shook her head, pursing up her mouth.

“Oh no. I don't fancy it. I'll send the kid down with the things and a billy of milk. Shall I knock up a few extry scones to take with you ter-morrow?”

“Thanks.”

She came and stood by the door.

“How old is the kid?”

“Six—come next Christmas. I'ad a bit of trouble with 'er one way an' another. I 'adn't any milk till a month after she was born and she sickened like a cow.”

“She's not like you—takes after her father?”

Just as the woman had shouted her refusal at us before, she shouted at me then.

“No, she don't! She's the dead spit of me.

Any fool could see that. Come on in now, Else, you stop messing in the dirt.”

I met Jo climbing over the paddock fence.

“What's the old bitch got in the store?” he asked.

“Don't know—didn't look.”

“Well, of all the fools. Hin's slanging you. What have you been doing all the time?”

“She couldn't find this stuff. Oh, my shakes, you are smart!”

Jo had washed, combed his wet hair in a line across his forehead, and buttoned a coat over his shirt. He grinned.

Hin snatched the embrocation from me. I went to the end of the paddock where the willows grew and bathed in the creek. The water was clear and soft as oil. Along the edges held by the grass and rushes, white foam tumbled and bubbled. I lay in the water and looked up at the trees that were still a moment, then quivered lightly, and again were



still. The air smelt of rain. I forgot about the woman and the kid until I came back to the tent. Hin lay by the fire, watching the billy boil.

I asked where Jo was, and if the kid had brought our supper.

“Pooh,” said Hin, rolling over and looking up at the sky. “Didn't you see how Jo had been titivating? He said to me before he went up to the whare, ‘Dang it! she'll look better by night light—at any rate, my buck, she's female flesh!’”

“You had Jo about her looks—you had me, too.”

“No—look here. I can't make it out. It's four years since I came past this way, and I stopped here two days. The husband was a pal of mine once, down the West Coast—a fine, big chap, with a voice on him like a trombone. She'd been barmaid down the Coast—as pretty as a wax doll. The coach used to come this way then once a fortnight, that was before they opened the railway up Napier way, and she had no end of a time! Told me once in a confidential moment that she knew one hundred and twenty - five different ways of kissing!”

“Oh, go on, Hin! She isn't the same woman!”

“Course she is I can't make it out. What I think is the old man's cleared out and left her: that's all my eye about shearing. Sweet life! The only people who come through now are Maoris and sundowners!”

Through the dark we saw the gleam of the kid's pinafore. She trailed over to us with a basket in her hand, the milk billy in the other. I unpacked the basket, the child standing by.

“Come over here,” said Hin, snapping his fingers at her.

She went, the lamp from the inside of the tent cast a bright light over her. A mean, undersized brat, with whitish hair, and weak eyes. She stood, legs wide apart and her stomach protruding.

“What do you do all day?” asked Hin.

She scraped out one tear with her little finger, looked at the result and said, “Draw.”

“Huh! What do you draw? Leave your ears alone!”

“Pictures.”

“What on?”

“Bits of butter paper an' a pencil of my Mumma's.”



“Boh! What a lot of words at one time!” Hin rolled his eyes at her. “Baa-lambs and moo-cows?”

“No, everything. I'll draw all of you when you're gone, and your horses and the tent, and that one”—she pointed to me— “with no clothes on in the creek. I looked at her where she couldn't see me from.”

“Thanks very much. How ripping of you,” said Hin. “Where's Dad?”

The kid pouted. “I won't tell you because I don't like yer face!” She started operations on the other ear.

“Here,” I said. “Take the basket, get along home and tell the other man supper's ready.”

“I don't want to.”

“I'll give you a box on the ear if you don't,” said Hin, savagely.

“Hie! I'll tell Mumma. I'll tell Mumma.” The kid fled.

We ate until we were full, and had arrived at the smoke stage before Jo came back, very flushed and jaunty, a whisky bottle in his hand.

“Ave a drink—you two!” he shouted, carrying off matters with a high hand. “Ere, shove along the cups.”

“One hundred and twenty-five different ways,” I murmured to Hin.

“What's that? Oh! stow it!” said Jo. “Why 'ave you always got your knife into me. You gas like a kid at a Sunday School beano. She wants us to go up there to-night, and have a comfortable chat. I”—he waved his hand airily— “I got 'er round.”

“Trust you for that,” laughed Hin. “But did she tell you where the old man's got to?”

Jo looked up. “Shearing! You 'eard 'er, you fool!”

The woman had fixed up the room, even to a light bouquet of sweet-williams on the table. She and I sat one side of the table, Jo and Hin the other. An oil lamp was set between us, the whisky bottle and glasses, and a jug of water. The kid knelt against one of the forms, drawing on butter paper; I wondered, grimly, if she was attempting the creek episode. But Jo had been right about night time. The woman's hair was tumbled—two red spots burned in her cheeks—her eyes shone—and we knew that they were kissing feet under the table. She had changed the blue pinafore for a white calico dressing jacket and a black skirt—the kid was decorated to the extent of a blue sateen hair ribbon. In the stifling room, with the flies buzzing against the ceiling and dropping on to the table, we got slowly drunk.



“Now listen to me,” shouted the woman, banging her fist on the table. “It’s six years since I was married, and four miscarriages. I says to ‘im, I says, what do you think I’m doin’ up ‘ere? If you was back at the coast, I’d ‘ave you lynched for child murder. Over and over I tells ‘im—you’ve broken my spirit and spoiled my looks, and wot for—that’s wot I’m driving at.” She clutched her head with her hands and stared round at us. Speaking rapidly, “Oh, some days—an’ months of them—I ‘ear them two words knockin’ inside me all the time— ‘Wot for!’ but sometimes I’ll be cooking the spuds an’ I lifts the lid off to give ‘em a prong and I ‘ears, quite suddin again, ‘Wot for!’ Oh! I don’t mean only the spuds and the kid—I mean—I mean,” she hiccupped—“you know what I mean, Mr. Jo.”

“I know,” said Jo, scratching his head.

“Trouble with me is,” she leaned across the table, “he left me too much alone. When the coach stopped coming, sometimes he’d go away days, sometimes he’d go away weeks, and leave me ter look after the store. Back ‘e’d come—pleased as Punch. ‘Oh, ‘allo, ‘e’d say. ‘Ow are you gettin’ on. Come and give us a kiss.’ Sometimes I’d turn a bit nasty, and then ‘e’d go off again, and if I took it all right, ‘e’d wait till ‘e could twist me round ‘is finger, then ‘e’d say, ‘Well, so long, I’m off,’ and do you think I could keep ‘im?—not me!”

“Mumma,” bleated the kid, “I made a picture of them on the ‘ill, an’ you an’ me, an’ the dog down below.”

“Shut your mouth!” said the woman.

A vivid flash of lightning played over the room—we heard the mutter of thunder.

“Good thing that’s broke loose,” said Jo. “I’ve ‘ad it in me ‘ead for three days.”

“Where’s your old man now?” asked Hin, slowly.

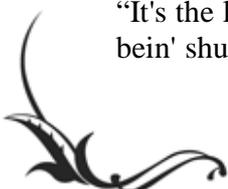
The woman blubbered and dropped her head on to the table. “Hin, ‘e’s gone shearin’ and left me alone again,” she wailed.

“Ere, look out for the glasses,” said Jo. “Cheer-o, ‘ave another drop. No good cryin’ over spilt ‘usbands! You Hin, you blasted cuckoo!”

“Mr. Jo,” said the woman, drying her eyes on her jacket frill, “you’re a gent, an’ if I was a secret woman, I’d place any confidence in your ‘ands. I don’t mind if I do ‘ave a glass on that.”

Every moment the lightning grew more vivid and the thunder sounded nearer. Hin and I were silent—the kid never moved from her bench. She poked her tongue out and blew on her paper as she drew.

“It’s the loneliness,” said the woman, addressing Jo—he made sheep’s eyes at her— “and bein’ shut up ‘ere like a broody ‘en.” He reached his hand across the table and held hers,



and though the position looked most uncomfortable when they wanted to pass the water and whisky, their hands stuck together as though glued. I pushed back my chair and went over to the kid, who immediately sat flat down on her artistic achievements and made a face at me.

“You're not to look,” said she.

“Oh, come on, don't be nasty!” Hin came over to us, and we were just drunk enough to wheedle the kid into showing us. And those drawings of hers were extraordinary and repulsively vulgar. The creations of a lunatic with a lunatic's cleverness. There was no doubt about it, the kid's mind was diseased. While she showed them to us, she worked herself up into a mad excitement, laughing and trembling, and shooting out her arms.

“Mumma,” she yelled. “Now I'm going to draw them what you told me I never was to—now I am.”

The woman rushed from the table and beat the child's head with the flat of her hand.

“I'll smack you with yer clothes turned up if yer dare say that again,” she bawled.

Jo was too drunk to notice, but Hin caught her by the arm. The kid did not utter a cry. She drifted over to the window and began picking flies from the treacle paper.

We returned to the table—Hin and I sitting one side, the woman and Jo, touching shoulders, the other. We listened to the thunder, saying stupidly, “That was a near one,” “There it goes again,” and Jo, at a heavy hit, “Now we're off,” “Steady on the brake,” until rain began to fall, sharp as cannon shot on the iron roof.

“You'd better doss here for the night,” said the woman.

“That's right,” assented Jo, evidently in the know about this move.

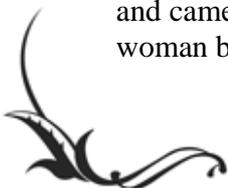
“Bring up yer things from the tent. You two can doss in the store along with the kid—she's used to sleep in there and won't mind you.”

“Oh Mumma, I never did,” interrupted the kid.

“Shut yer lies! An' Mr. Jo can 'ave this room.”

It sounded a ridiculous arrangement, but it was useless to attempt to cross them, they were too far gone. While the woman sketched the plan of action, Jo sat, abnormally solemn and red, his eyes bulging, and pulling at his moustache.

“Give us a lantern,” said Hin, “I'll go down to the paddock.” We two went together. Rain whipped in our faces, the land was light as though a bush fire was raging. We behaved like two children let loose in the thick of an adventure, laughed and shouted to each other, and came back to the whare to find the kid already bedded in the counter of the store. The woman brought us a lamp. Jo took his bundle from Hin, the door was shut.



“Good-night all,” shouted Jo.

Hin and I sat on two sacks of potatoes. For the life of us we could not stop laughing. Strings of onions and half-hams dangled from the ceiling—wherever we looked there were advertisements for “Camp Coffee” and tinned meats. We pointed at them, tried to read them aloud—overcome with laughter and hiccoughs. The kid in the counter stared at us. She threw off her blanket and scrambled to the floor, where she stood in her grey flannel night-gown, rubbing one leg against the other. We paid no attention to her.

“Wot are you laughing at?” she said, uneasily.

“You!” shouted Hin. “The red tribe of you, my child.”

She flew into a rage and beat herself with her hands. “I won't be laughed at, you curs—you.” He swooped down upon the child and swung her on to the counter.

“Go to sleep, Miss Smarty—or make a drawing—here's a pencil—you can use Mumma's account book.”

Through the rain we heard Jo creak over the boarding of the next room—the sound of a door being opened—then shut to.

“It's the loneliness,” whispered Hin.

“One hundred and twenty-five different ways—alas! my poor brother!”

The kid tore out a page and flung it at me.

“There you are,” she said. “Now I done it ter spite Mumma for shutting me up 'ere with you two. I done the one she told me I never ought to. I done the one she told me she'd shoot me if I did. Don't care! Don't care!”

The kid had drawn the picture of the woman shooting at a man with a rook rifle and then digging a hole to bury him in.

She jumped off the counter and squirmed about on the floor biting her nails.

Hin and I sat till dawn with the drawing beside us. The rain ceased, the little kid fell asleep, breathing loudly. We got up, stole out of the whare, down into the paddock. White clouds floated over a pink sky—a chill wind blew; the air smelled of wet grass. Just as we swung into the saddle Jo came out of the whare—he motioned to us to ride on.

“I'll pick you up later,” he shouted.

A bend in the road, and the whole place disappeared.

