



## FATHER AND THE GIRLS (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

At midday, Ernestine, who had come down from the mountains with her mother to work in the vineyards belonging to the hotel, heard the faint, far-away *chuff-chuff* of the train from Italy. Trains were a novelty to Ernestine; they were fascinating, unknown, terrible. What were they like as they came tearing their way through the valley, plunging between the mountains as if not even the mountains could stop them? When she saw the dark, flat breast of the engine, so bare, so powerful, hurled as it were towards her, she felt a weakness; she could have sunk to the earth. And yet she must look. So she straightened up, stopped pulling at the blue-green leaves, tugging at the long, bright-green, curly suckers, and, with eyes like a bird, stared. The vines were very tall. There was nothing to be seen of Ernestine but her beautiful, youthful bosom buttoned into a blue cotton jacket and her small, dark head covered with a faded cherry-coloured handkerchief.

*Chiff-chuff-chaff. Chiff-chuff-chaff,* sounded the train. Now a wisp of white smoke shone and melted. Now there was another, and the monster itself came into sight and snorting horribly drew up at the little, toy-like station five minutes away. The railway ran at the bottom of the hotel garden which was perched high and surrounded by a stone wall. Steps cut in the stone led to the terraces where the vines were planted. Ernestine, looking out from the leaves like a bright bird, saw the terrible engine and looked beyond it at doors swinging open, at strangers stepping down. She would never know who they were or where they had come from. A moment ago they were not here; perhaps by tomorrow they would be gone again. And looking like a bird herself, she remembered how, at home, in the late autumn, she had sometimes seen strange birds in the fir tree that were there one day and gone the next. Where from? Where to? She felt an ache in her bosom. Wings were tight-folded there. Why could she not stretch them out and fly away and away? . . .

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From the first-class carriage tall, thin Emily alighted and gave her hand to Father whose brittle legs seemed to wave in the air as they felt for the iron step. Taller, thinner Edith followed, carrying Father's light overcoat, his field-glasses on a strap, and his new Baedeker. The blond hotel porter came forward. Wasn't that nice? He could speak as good English as you or me. So Edith had no trouble at all in explaining how, as they were going on by the morning train tomorrow, they would only need their suit-cases, and what was left in the compartment. Was there a carriage outside? Yes, a carriage was there. But if they cared to walk there was a private entrance through the hotel gardens. . . . No, they wouldn't walk.

“You wouldn’t care to walk, would you, Father dear?”

“No, Edith, I won’t walk. Do you girls wanna walk?”

“Why no, Father, not without you, dear.”

And the blond hotel porter leading, they passed through the little knot of sturdy peasants at the station gate to where the carriage waited under a group of limes.

“Did you ever see anything as big as that horse, Edith!” cried Emily. She was always the first to exclaim about things.

“It is a very big horse,” sang Edith, more sober. “It’s a farm horse, from the look of it and it’s been working. See how hot it is.” Edith had so much observation. The big, brown horse, his sides streaked with dark sweat, tossed his head and the bells on his collar set up a loud jangling.

“Hu-yup!” called the young peasant driver warningly, from his seat on the high box.

Father, who was just about to get in, drew back, a little scared.

“You don’t think that horse will run away with us, do you, Edith?” he quavered.

“Why no, Father dear,” coaxed Edith. “That horse is just as tame as you or me.” So in they got, the three of them. And as the horse bounded forward his ears seemed to twitch in surprise at his friend the driver. Call that a load? Father and the girls weighed nothing. They might have been three bones, three broomsticks, three umbrellas bouncing up and down on the hard seats of the carriage. It was a mercy the hotel was so close. Father could never have stood that for more than a minute, especially at the end of a journey. Even as it was his face was quite green when Emily helped him out, straightened him, and gave him a little pull.

“It’s shaken you, dear, hasn’t it?” she said tenderly.

But he refused her arm into the hotel. That would create a wrong impression.

“No, no, Emily. I’m all right. All right,” said Father, as staggering a little he followed them through big glass doors into a hall as dim as a church and as chill and as deserted.

My! Wasn’t that hall cold! The cold seemed to come leaping at them from the floor. It clasped the peaked knees of Edith and Emily; it leapt high as the fluttering heart of Father. For a moment they hesitated, drew together, almost gasped. But then out from the Bureau a cheerful young person, her smiling face spotted with mosquito bites, ran to meet them, and welcomed them with such real enthusiasm (in English too) that the chill first moment was forgotten.

“Aw-yes. Aw-yes. I can let you ave very naice rooms on de firs floor wid a lif. Two rooms and bart and dressing-room for de chentleman. Beautiful rooms wid sun but nort too hot. Very naice. Till tomorrow. I taik you. If you please. It is dis way. You are tired wid the churney? Launch is at half-pas tvelf. Hort worter? Aw-yes. It is wid de bart. If you please.”

Father and the girls were drawn by her cheerful smiles and becks and nods along a cloister-like corridor, into the lift and up, until she flung open a heavy, dark door and stood aside for them to enter.

“It is a suite,” she explained. “Wid a hall and tree doors.” Quickly she opened them. “Now I gaw to see when your luggage is gum.”

And she went.

“Well!” cried Emily.

Edith stared.

Father craned his thin, old neck, looking, too.

“Did you—ever see the like, Edith?” cried Emily, in a little rush.

And Edith softly clasped her hands. Softly she sang “No, I never did, Emily. I’ve never seen anything just like this before.”

“Sims to me a nice room,” quavered Father, still hovering. “Do you girls wanna change it?”

Change it! “Why, Father dear, it’s just the loveliest thing we’ve ever set eyes on, isn’t it, Emily? Sit down, Father dear, sit down in the armchair.”

Father’s pale claws gripped the velvet arms. He lowered himself, he sank with an old man’s quick sigh.

Edith still stood, as if bewitched, at the door. But Emily ran over to the window and leaned out, quite girlish. . . .

For a long time now—for how long?—for countless ages—Father and the girls had been on the wing. Nice, Montreux, Biarritz, Naples, Mentone, Lake Maggiore, they had seen them all and many, many more. And still they beat on, beat on, flying as if unwearied, never stopping anywhere for long. But the truth was—Oh, better not enquire what the truth was. Better not ask what it was that kept them going. Or why the only word that daunted Father was the word—home. . . .

Home! To sit around, doing nothing, listening to the clock, counting up the years, thinking back . . . thinking! To stay fixed in one place as if waiting for something or somebody. No! no! Better far to be blown over the earth like the husk, like the withered pod that the wind carries and drops and bears aloft again.

“Are you ready, girls?”

“Yes, Father dear.”

“Then we’d better be off if we’re to make that train.”

But oh, it was a weariness, it was an unspeakable weariness. Father made no secret of his age; he was eighty-four. As for Edith and Emily—well, he looked now like their elder brother. An old, old brother and two ancient sisters, so the lovely room might have summed them up. But its shaded brightness, its beauty, the flutter of leaves at the creamy stone windows seemed only to whisper “Rest! Stay!”

Edith looked at the pale, green-panelled walls, at the doors that had lozenges and squares of green picked out in gold. She made the amazing discovery that the floor had the same pattern in wood that was traced on the high, painted ceiling. But the colour of the shining floor was marvellous; it was like tortoiseshell. In one corner there was a huge, tilted stove, milky white and blue. The low wooden bed, with its cover of quilted yellow satin, had sheaves of corn carved on the bed posts. It looked to fanciful, tired Edith—yes,—that bed looked as if it were breathing, softly, gently breathing. Outside the narrow, deep-set windows, beyond their wreaths of green, she could see a whole, tiny landscape bright as a jewel in the summer heat.

“Rest! Stay!” Was it the sound of the leaves outside? No, it was in the air; it was the room itself that whispered joyfully, shyly. Edith felt so strange that she could keep quiet no longer.

“This is a very old room, Emily,” she warbled softly. “I know what it is. This hotel has not always been a hotel. It’s been an old chateau. I feel as sure of that as that I’m standing here.” Perhaps she wanted to convince herself that she was standing there. “Do you see that stove?” She walked over to the stove. “It’s got figures on it. Emily,” she warbled faintly, “it’s 1623.”

“Isn’t that too wonderful!” cried Emily.

Even Father was deeply moved.

“1623? Nearly three hundred years old.” And suddenly, in spite of his tiredness, he gave a thin, airy, old man’s chuckle. “Makes yer feel quite a chicken, don’t it?” said Father.

Emily’s breathless little laugh answered him; it too was gay.

“I’m going to see what’s behind that door,” she cried. And half running to the door in the middle wall she lifted the slender steel catch. It led into a larger room, into Edith’s and her bedroom. But the walls were the same and the floor, and there were the same deep-set windows. Only two beds instead of one stood side by side with blue silk quilts instead of yellow. And what a beautiful old chest there was under the windows!

“Oh,” cried Emily, in rapture. “Isn’t it all too perfectly historical for words, Edith! It makes me feel——” She stopped, she looked at Edith who had followed her and whose thin shadow lay on the sunny floor. “Queer!” said Emily, trying to put all she felt into that one word. “I don’t know what it is.”

Perhaps if Edith, the discoverer, had had time, she might have satisfied Emily. But a knock sounded at the outer door; it was the luggage boy. And while he brought in their suitcases there came from downstairs the ringing of the luncheon bell. Father mustn’t be kept

waiting. Once a bell had gone he liked to follow it up right then. So without even a glance at the mirror—they had reached the age when it is as natural to avoid mirrors as it is to peer into them when one is young—Edith and Emily were ready.

“Are you ready, girls?”

“Yes, Father dear.”

And off they went again, to the left, to the right, down a stone staircase with a broad, worn balustrade, to the left again, finding their way as if by instinct—Edith first, then Father, and Emily close behind.

But when they reached the *salle à manger*, which was as big as a ball-room, it was still empty. All gay, all glittering, the long French windows open on to the green and gold garden, the *salle à manger* stretched before them. And the fifty little tables with the fifty pots of dahlias looked as if they might begin dancing with . . .