



MR. AND MRS. WILLIAMS (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

That winter Mr. and Mrs. Williams of The Rowans, Wickenham, Surrey, astonished their friends by announcing that they were going for a three weeks' holiday to Switzerland. Switzerland! How very enterprising and exciting! There was quite a flutter in Wickenham households at the news. Husbands coming home from the city in the evening were greeted immediately with:

"My dear, have you heard the news about the Williams?"

"No! What's up now?"

"They're off to Switzerland."

"Switzerland! What the dickens are they going there for?"

That, of course, was only the extravagance of the moment. One knew perfectly well why people went. But nobody in Wickenham ever plunged so far away from home at that time of year. It was not considered "necessary"—as golf, bridge, a summer holiday at the sea, an account at Harrods' and a small car as soon as one could afford it, were considered necessary. . . .

"Won't you find the initial expenditure very heavy?" asked stout old Mrs. Prean, meeting Mrs. Williams quite by chance at their nice obliging grocer's. And she brushed the crumbs of a sample cheese biscuit off her broad bosom.

"Oh, we shall get our kit over there," said Mrs. Williams.

"Kit" was a word in high favour among the Wickenham ladies. It was left over from the war, of course, with "cheery," "washout," "Hun," "Boche," and "Bolshy." As a matter of fact, Bolshy was post-war. But it belonged to the same mood. ("My dear, my housemaid is an absolute little Hun, and I'm afraid the cook is turning Bolshy. . . .") There was a fascination in those words. To use them was like opening one's Red Cross cupboard again, and gazing at the remains of the bandages, body-belts, tins of anti-insectide and so on. One was stirred, one got a far-away thrill, like the thrill of hearing a distant band. It reminded you of those exciting, busy, of course anxious, but tremendous days when the whole of Wickenham was one united family. And, although one's husband was away, one had for a substitute three large photographs of him in uniform. One in a silver frame on the table by the bed, one in the regimental colours on the piano, and one in leather to match the dining-room chairs.

"Cook strongly advised us to buy nothing here," went on Mrs. Williams.



“Cook!” cried Mrs. Prean, greatly astounded. “What can——”

“Oh—*Thomas Cook*, of course I mean,” said Mrs. Williams, smiling brightly. Mrs. Prean subsided.

“But you will surely not depend upon the resources of a little Swiss village for clothes?” she persisted, deeply interested, as usual, in other people’s affairs.

“Oh, no, certainly not.” Mrs. Williams was quite shocked. “We shall get all we need in the way of clothes from Harrods’.”

That was what Mrs. Prean had wished to hear. That was as it should be.

“The great secret my dear” (she always knew the great secret), “the great secret,”— and she put her hand on Mrs. Williams’ arm and spoke very distinctly— “is plenty of long-sleeved woven combies!”

“Thank you, m’m.”

Both ladies started. There at their side was Mr. Wick, the nice grocer, holding Mrs. Prean’s parcel by a loop of pink string. Dear me—how very awkward! He must have . . . he couldn’t possibly not have . . . In the emotion of the moment Mrs. Prean, thinking to gloss it over tactfully, nodded significantly at Mrs. Williams and said, accepting the parcel, “And that is what I always tell my dear son!” But this was too swift for Mrs. Williams to follow.

Her embarrassment continued, and ordering the sardines, she just stopped herself from saying “Three large pairs, Mr. Wick, please,” instead of “Three large tins.”

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As a matter of fact it was Mrs. Williams’ Aunt Aggie’s happy release which had made their scheme possible. Happy release it was! After fifteen years in a wheel-chair passing in and out of the little house at Ealing she had, to use the nurse’s expression, “just glided away at the last.” Glided away . . . it sounded as though Aunt Aggie had taken the wheel chair with her. One saw her, in her absurd purple velvet, steering carefully among the stars and whimpering faintly, as was her terrestrial wont, when the wheel jolted over a particularly large one.

Aunt Aggie had left her dear niece Gwendolen two hundred and fifty pounds. Not a vast sum by any means, but quite a nice little windfall. Gwendolen, in that dashing mood that only women know, decided immediately to spend it—part of it on the house and the rest on a treat for Gerald. And the lawyer’s letter happening to come at tea-time together with a copy of the *Sphere* full of the most fascinating, thrilling photographs of holiday-makers at Miiirren and St. Moritz and Montana, the question of the treat was settled.

“You would like to go to Switzerland, wouldn’t you, Gerald?”

“Very much.”

“You’re—awfully good at skating and all that kind of thing—aren’t you?”

“Fairly.”

“You do feel it’s a thing to be done—don’t you?”

“How do you mean?”



But Gwendolen only laughed. That was so like Gerald. She knew, in his heart of hearts he was every bit as keen as she was. But he had this horror of showing his feelings—like all men. Gwendolen understood it perfectly and wouldn't have had him different for the world. . . .

"I'll write to Cook's at once and tell them we don't want to go to a very fashionable place, and we don't want one of those big jazzy hotels! I'd much prefer a really small out-of-the-way place where we could really go in for the sports seriously." This was quite untrue, but, like so many of Gwendolen's statements, it was made to please Gerald. "Don't you agree?"

Gerald lit his pipe for reply.

As you have gathered, the Christian names of Mr. and Mrs. Williams were Gwendolen and Gerald. How well they went together! They sounded married. Gwendolen—Gerald. Gwendolen wrote them, bracketed, on bits of blotting paper, on the backs of old envelopes, on the Stores' catalogue. They looked married.

Gerald, when they were on their honeymoon, had made an awfully good joke about them. He had said one morning, "I say, has it ever struck you that both our names begin with *G*? Gwendolen—Gerald. You're a *G*," and he had pointed his razor at her—he was shaving—"and I'm a *G*. Two *G*s. Gee-Gee. See?"

Oh, Gwendolen saw immediately. It was really most witty. Quite brilliant! And so—sweet and unexpected of him to have thought of it. Gee-Gee. Oh, *very* good! She wished she could have told it to people. She had an idea that some people thought Gerald had not a very strong sense of humour. But it was a little too intimate. All the more precious for that reason, however.

"My dear, did you think of it at this moment? I mean—did you just make it up on the spot?"

Gerald, rubbing the lather with a finger, nodded. "Flashed into my mind while I was soaping my face," said he seriously. "It's a queer thing,"—and he dipped the razor into the pot of hot water—"I've noticed it before. Shaving gives me ideas." It did, indeed, thought Gwendolen. . . .

