



## **SUCH A SWEET OLD LADY (1923)**

**By Katherine Mansfield**

Why did old Mrs. Travers wake so early nowadays? She would like to have slept for another three hours at least. But no, every morning at almost precisely the same time, at half-past four, she was wide awake. For—nowadays, again—she woke always in the same way, with a slight start, a small shock, lifting her head from the pillow with a quick glance as if she fancied someone had called her, or as if she were trying to remember for certain whether this was the same wallpaper, the same window she had seen last night before Warner switched off the light. . . . Then the small, silvery head pressed the white pillow again and just for a moment, before the agony of lying awake began, old Mrs. Travers was happy. Her heart quietened down, she breathed deeply, she even smiled. Yet once more the tide of darkness had risen, had floated her, had carried her away; and once more it had ebbed, it had withdrawn, casting her up where it had found her, shut in by the same wallpaper, stared at by the same window—still safe—still *there!*

Now the church clock sounded from outside, slow, languid, faint, as if it chimed the half hour in its sleep. She felt under the pillow for her watch; yes, it said the same. Half-past four. Three and a half hours before Warner came in with her tea. Oh dear, would she be able to stand it? She moved her legs restlessly. And, staring at the prim, severe face of the watch, it seemed to her that the hand—the minute hand especially—knew that she was watching them and held back—just a very little—on purpose. . . . Very strange, she had never got over the feeling that watch hated her. It had been Henry's. Twenty years ago, when standing by poor Henry's bed, she had taken it into her hands for the first time and wound it, it had felt cold and heavy. And two days later, when she undid a hook of her crape bodice and thrust it inside, it had lain in her bosom like a stone. . . . It had never felt at home there. Its place was—ticking, keeping perfect time, against Henry's firm ribs. It had never trusted her, just as he had never trusted her in those ways. And on the rare occasions when she had forgotten to wind it, she had felt a pang of almost terror, and she had murmured as she fitted the little key: "Forgive me, Henry!"

Old Mrs. Travers sighed, and pushed the watch under the pillow again. It seemed to her that lately this feeling that it hated her had become more definite. . . . Perhaps that was because she looked at it so often, especially now that she was away from home. Foreign clocks never go. They are always stopped at twenty minutes to two. Twenty minutes to two! Such an unpleasant time, neither one thing nor the other. If one arrived anywhere lunch was over and it was too early to expect a cup of tea. . . . But she mustn't begin thinking about tea. Old Mrs. Travers pulled herself up in the bed, and like a tired baby, she lifted her arms and let them fall on the eiderdown.



The room was gay with morning light. The big French window on to the balcony was open and the palm outside flung its quivering spiderlike shadow over the bedroom walls. Although their hotel did not face the front, at this early hour you could smell the sea, you could hear it breathing, and flying high on golden wings sea-gulls skimmed past. How peaceful the sky looked, as though it was tenderly smiling! Far away—far away from this satin-stripe wallpaper, the glass-covered table, the yellow brocade sofa and chairs, and the mirrors that showed you your side view, your back view, your three-quarters view as well.

Ernestine had been enthusiastic about this room.

“It’s just the very room for you, Mother! So bright and attractive and non-depressing! With a balcony, too, so that on wet days you can still have your chair outside and look at those lovely palms. And Gladys can have the little room adjoining, which makes it so beautifully easy for Warner to keep her eye on you both. . . . You couldn’t have a nicer room, could you, Mother? I can’t get over that sweet balcony! So nice for Gladys! Cecil and I haven’t got one at all. . . .”

But all the same, in spite of Ernestine, she never sat on that balcony. For some strange reason that she couldn’t explain she hated looking at palms. Nasty foreign things, she called them in her mind. When they were still they drooped, they looked dragged like immense untidy birds, and when they moved, they reminded her always of spiders. Why did they never look just natural and peaceful and shady like English trees? Why were they forever writhing and twisting or standing sullen? It tired her even to think of them, or in fact of anything foreign. . . .

