Katherine Mansfield

Marriage a la mode

Vertiges
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Albert-Auguste Fourie (1854-1937),
Repas de noces à Yport (1886),
collection du Musée des beaux-arts, Rouen, France.

Anonyme, *Katherine Mansfield* (1888-1923), en 1917.
National Portrait Gallery, Londres, Angleterre.

MARRIAGE À LA MODE

ON HIS WAY to the station William remembered with a fresh pang of disappointment that he was taking nothing down to the kiddies. Poor little chaps! It was hard lines on them. Their first words always were as they ran to greet him, «What have you got for me, daddy?» and he had nothing. He would have to buy them some sweets at the station. But that was what he had done for the past four Saturdays; their faces had fallen last time when they saw the same old boxes produced again.

And Paddy had said, «I had red ribbing on mine bee-fore!»

And Johnny had said, «It's always pink on mine. I hate pink.»

But what was William to do? The affair wasn't so easily settled. In the old days, of course, he would have taken a taxi off to a decent toyshop and chosen them something in five minutes. But nowadays they had Russian toys, French toys, Serbian toys–toys from God knows where. It was over a year since Isabel had scrapped the old donkeys and engines and so on because they were so «dreadfully sentimental» and «so appallingly bad for the babies' sense of form.»

«It's so important,» the new Isabel had explained, «that they should like the right things from the very beginning. It saves so much time later on. Really, if the poor pets have to spend their infant years staring at these horrors, one can imagine them growing up and asking to be taken to the Royal Academy.»

And she spoke as though a visit to the Royal Academy was certain immediate death to any one....

«Well, I don't know,» said William slowly. «When I was their age I used to go to bed hugging an old towel with a knot in it.»

The new Isabel looked at him, her eyes narrowed, her lips apart.

«Dear William! I'm sure you did!» She laughed in the new way.

Sweets it would have to be, however, thought William gloomily, fishing in his pocket for change for the taxi-man. And he saw the kiddies handing the boxes round–they were awfully generous little chaps–while Isabel's precious friends didn't hesitate to help themselves....

What about fruit? William hovered before a stall just inside the station. What about a melon each? Would they have to share that, too? Or a pineapple, for Pad, and a melon for Johnny? Isabel's friends could hardly go sneaking up to the nursery at the children's meal-times. All the same, as he bought the melon William had a horrible vision of one of Isabel's young poets lapping up a slice, for some reason, behind the nursery door.

With his two very awkward parcels he strode off to his train. The platform was crowded, the train was in. Doors banged open and shut. There came such a loud hissing from the engine that people looked dazed as they scurried to and fro. William made straight for a first-class smoker, stowed away his suit-case and parcels, and taking a huge wad of papers out of his inner pocket, he flung down in the corner and began to read.

«Our client moreover is positive.... We are inclined to reconsider . . . in the event of–» Ah, that was better. William pressed back his flattened hair and stretched his legs across the carriage floor. The familiar dull gnawing in his breast quietened down. «With regard to our decision–» He took out a blue pencil and scored a paragraph slowly.

Two men came in, stepped across him, and made for the farther corner. A young fellow swung his golf clubs into the rack and sat down opposite. The train gave a gentle lurch, they were off. William glanced up and saw the hot, bright station slipping away. A red-faced girl raced along by the carriages, there was something strained and almost desperate in the way she waved and called. «Hysterical!» thought William dully. Then a greasy, black-faced workman at the end of the platform grinned at the passing train. And William thought, «A filthy life!» and went back to his papers.

When he looked up again there were fields, and beasts standing for shelter under the dark trees. A wide river, with naked children splashing in the shallows, glided into sight and was gone again. The sky shone pale, and one bird drifted high like a dark fleck in a jewel.

«We have examined our client's correspondence files....» The last sentence he had read echoed in his mind. «We have examined...» William hung on to that sentence, but it was no good; it snapped in the middle, and the fields, the sky, the sailing bird, the water, all said, «Isabel.» The same thing happened every Saturday afternoon. When he was on his way to meet Isabel there began those countless imaginary meetings. She was at the station, standing just a little apart from everybody else; she was sitting in the open taxi outside; she was at the garden gate; walking across the parched grass; at the door, or just inside the hall.

And her clear, light voice said, «It's William,» or «Hillo, William!» or «So William has come!» He touched her cool hand, her cool cheek.

The exquisite freshness of Isabel! When he had been a little boy, it was his delight to run into the garden after a shower of rain and shake the rose-bush over him. Isabel was that rose-bush, petal-soft, sparkling and cool. And he was still that little boy. But there was no running into the garden now, no laughing and shaking. The dull, persistent gnawing in his breast started again. He drew up his legs, tossed the papers aside, and shut his eyes.

«What is it, Isabel? What is it?» he said tenderly. They were in their bedroom in the new house. Isabel sat on a painted stool before the dressing-table that was strewn with little black and green boxes.

«What is what, William?» And she bent forward, and her fine light hair fell over her cheeks.

«Ah, you know!» He stood in the middle of the room and he felt a stranger. At that Isabel wheeled round quickly and faced him.

«Oh, William!» she cried imploringly, and she held up the hair-brush: «Please! Please don't be so dreadfully stuffy and–tragic. You're always saying or looking or hinting that I've changed. Just because I've got to know really congenial people, and go about more, and am frightfully keen on–on everything, you behave as though I'd–» Isabel tossed back her hair and laughed–»killed our love or something. It's so awfully absurd»–she bit her lip–»and it's so maddening, William. Even this new house and the servants you grudge me.»

«Isabel!»

«Yes, yes, it's true in a way,» said Isabel quickly. «You think they are another bad sign. Oh, I know you do. I feel it,» she said softly, «every time you come up the stairs. But we couldn't have gone on living in that other poky little hole, William. Be practical, at least! Why, there wasn't enough room for the babies even.»

No, it was true. Every morning when he came back from chambers it was to find the babies with Isabel in the back drawing-room. They were having rides on the leopard skin thrown over the sofa back, or they were playing shops with Isabel's desk for a counter, or Pad was sitting on the hearthrug rowing away for dear life with a little brass fire shovel, while Johnny shot at pirates with the tongs. Every evening they each had a pick-a-back up the narrow stairs to their fat old Nanny.

Yes, he supposed it was a poky little house. A little white house with blue curtains and a window-box of petunias. William met their friends at the door with «Seen our petunias? Pretty terrific for London, don't you think?»

But the imbecile thing, the absolutely extraordinary thing was that he hadn't the slightest idea the Isabel wasn't as happy as he. God, what blindness! He hadn't the remotest notion in those days that she really hated the inconvenient little house, that she thought the fat Nanny was ruining the babies, that she was desperately lonely, pining for new people and new music and pictures and so on. If they hadn't gone to that studio party at Moira Morrison's–if Moira Morrison hadn't said as they were leaving, «I'm going to rescue your wife, selfish man. She's like an exquisite little Titania»–if Isabel hadn't gone with Moira to Paris–if–if...

The train stopped at another station. Bettingford. Good heavens! They'd be there in ten minutes. William stuffed that papers back into his pockets; the young man opposite had long since disappeared. Now the other two got out. The late afternoon sun shone on women in cotton frocks and little sunburnt, barefoot children. It blazed on a silky yellow flower with coarse leaves which sprawled over a bank of rock. The air ruffling through the window smelled of the sea. Had Isabel the same crowd with her this week-end, wondered William?

And he remembered the holidays they used to have, the four of them, with a little farm girl, Rose, to look after the babies. Isabel wore a jersey and her hair in a plait; she looked about fourteen. Lord! how his nose used to peel! And the amount they ate, and the amount they slept in that immense feather bed with their feet locked together.... William couldn't help a grim smile as he thought of Isabel's horror if she knew the full extent of his sentimentality.

....

«Hillo, William!» She was at the station after all, standing just as he had imagined, apart from the others, and–William's heart leapt–she was alone.

«Hallo, Isabel!» William stared. He thought she looked so beautiful that he had to say something, «You look very cool.»

«Do I?» said Isabel. «I don't feel very cool. Come along, your horrid old train is late. The taxi's outside.» She put her hand lightly on his arm as they passed the ticket collector. «We've all come to meet you,» she said. «But we've left Bobby Kane at the sweet shop, to be called for.»

«Oh!» said William. It was all he could say for the moment.

There in the glare waited the taxi, with Bill Hunt and Dennis Green sprawling on one side, their hats tilted over their faces, while on the other, Moira Morrison, in a bonnet like a huge strawberry, jumped up and down.

«No ice! No ice! No ice!» she shouted gaily.

And Dennis chimed in from under his hat. «Only to be had from the fishmonger's.»

And Bill Hunt, emerging, added, «With whole fish in it.»

«Oh, what a bore!» wailed Isabel. And she explained to William how they had been chasing round the town for ice while she waited for him. «Simply everything is running down the steep cliffs into the sea, beginning with the butter.»

«We shall have to anoint ourselves with butter,» said Dennis. «May thy head, William, lack not ointment.»

«Look here,» said William, «how are we going to sit? I'd better get up by the driver.»

«No, Bobby Kane's by the driver,» said Isabel. «You're to sit between Moira and me.» The taxi started. «What have you got in those mysterious parcels?»

«De-cap-it-ated heads!» said Bill Hunt, shuddering beneath his hat.

«Oh, fruit!» Isabel sounded very pleased. «Wise William! A melon and a pineapple. How too nice!»

«No, wait a bit,» said William, smiling. But he really was anxious. «I brought them down for the kiddies.»

«Oh, my dear!» Isabel laughed, and slipped her hand through his arm. «They'd be rolling in agonies if they were to eat them. No»–she patted his hand–»you must bring them something next time. I refuse to part with my pineapple.»

«Cruel Isabel! Do let me smell it!» said Moira. She flung her arms across William appealingly. «Oh!» The strawberry bonnet fell forward: she sounded quite faint.

«A Lady in Love with a Pineapple,» said Dennis, as the taxi drew up before a little shop with a striped blind. Out came Bobby Kane, his arms full of little packets.

«I do hope they'll be good. I've chosen them because of the colours. There are some round things which really look too divine. And just look at this nougat,» he cried ecstatically, «Just look at it! It's a perfect little ballet.»

But at that moment the shopman appeared. «Oh, I forgot. They're none of them paid for,» said Bobby, looking frightened. Isabel gave the shopman a note, and Bobby was radiant again. «Hallo, William! I'm sitting by the driver.» And bareheaded, all in white, with his sleeves rolled up to the shoulders, he leapt into his place. «Avanti!» he cried....

After tea the others went off to bathe, while William stayed and made his peace with the kiddies. But Johnny and Paddy were asleep, the rose-red glow had paled, bats were flying, and still the bathers had not returned. As William wandered downstairs, the maid crossed the hall carrying a lamp. He followed her into the sitting-room. It was a long room, coloured yellow. On the wall opposite William some one had painted a young man, over life-size, with very wobbly legs, offering a wide-eyed daisy to a young woman who had one very short arm and one very long, thin one. Over the chairs and sofa there hung strips of black material, covered with big splashes like broken eggs, and everywhere one looked there seemed to be an ash-tray full of cigarette ends. William sat down in one of the arm-chairs. Nowadays, when one felt with one hand down the sides, it wasn't to come upon a sheep with three legs or a cow that had lost one horn, or a very fat dove out of the Noah's Ark. One fished up yet another little paper-covered book of smudged-looking poems.... He thought of the wad of papers in his pocket, but he was too hungry and tired to read. The door was open; sounds came from the kitchen. The servants were talking as if they were alone in the house. Suddenly there came a loud screech of laughter and an equally loud «Sh!» They had remembered him. William got up and went through the French windows into the garden, and as he stood there in the shadow he heard the bathers coming up the sandy road; their voices rang through the quiet.

«I think its up to Moira to use her little arts and wiles.»

A tragic moan from Moira.

«We ought to have a gramophone for the weekends that played 'The Maid of the Mountains.'»

«Oh no! Oh no!» cried Isabel's voice. «That's not fair to William. Be nice to him, my children! He's only staying until to-morrow evening.»

«Leave him to me,» cried Bobby Kane. «I'm awfully good at looking after people.»

The gate swung open and shut. William moved on the terrace; they had seen him. «Hallo, William!» And Bobby Kane, flapping his towel, began to leap and pirouette on the parched lawn. «Pity you didn't come, William. The water was divine. And we all went to a little pub afterwards and had sloe gin.»

The others had reached the house. «I say, Isabel,» called Bobby, «would you like me to wear my Nijinsky dress to-night?»

«No,» said Isabel, «nobody's going to dress. We're all starving. William's starving, too. Come along, *mes amis*, let's begin with *sardines*.»

«I've found the *sardines*,» said Moira, and she ran into the hall, holding a box high in the air.

«A Lady with a Box of Sardines,» said Dennis gravely.

«Well, William, and how's London?» asked Bill Hunt, drawing the cork out of a bottle of whisky.

«Oh, London's not much changed,» answered William.

«Good old London,» said Bobby, very hearty, spearing a sardine.

But a moment later William was forgotten. Moira Morrison began wondering what colour one's legs really were under water.

«Mine are the palest, palest mushroom colour.»

Bill and Dennis ate enormously. And Isabel filled glasses, and changed plates, and found matches, smiling blissfully. At one moment, she said, «I do wish, Bill, you'd paint it.»

«Paint what?» said Bill loudly, stuffing his mouth with bread.

«Us,» said Isabel, «round the table. It would be so fascinating in twenty years' time.»

Bill screwed up his eyes and chewed. «Light's wrong,» he said rudely, «far too much yellow»; and went on eating. And that seemed to charm Isabel, too.

But after supper they were all so tired they could do nothing but yawn until it was late enough to go to bed....

It was not until William was waiting for his taxi the next afternoon that he found himself alone with Isabel. When he brought his suit-case down into the hall, Isabel left the others and went over to him. She stooped down and picked up the suit-case. «What a weight!» she said, and she gave a little awkward laugh. «Let me carry it! To the gate.»

«No, why should you?» said William. «Of course, not. Give it to me.»

«Oh, please, do let me,» said Isabel. «I want to, really.» They walked together silently. William felt there was nothing to say now.

«There,» said Isabel triumphantly, setting the suit-case down, and she looked anxiously along the sandy road. «I hardly seem to have seen you this time,» she said breathlessly. «It's so short, isn't it? I feel you've only just come. Next time–» The taxi came into sight. «I hope they look after you properly in London. I'm so sorry the babies have been out all day, but Miss Neil had arranged it. They'll hate missing you. Poor William, going back to London.» The taxi turned. «Goodbye!» She gave him a little hurried kiss; she was gone.

Fields, trees, hedges streamed by. They shook through the empty, blind-looking little town, ground up the steep pull to the station.

The train was in. William made straight for a first-class smoker, flung back into the corner, but this time he let the papers alone. He folded his arms against the dull, persistent gnawing, and began in his mind to write a letter to Isabel.

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The post was late as usual. They sat outside the house in long chairs under coloured parasols. Only Bobby Kane lay on the turf at Isabel's feet. It was dull, stifling; the day drooped like a flag.

«Do you think there will be Mondays in Heaven?» asked Bobby childishly.

And Dennis murmured, «Heaven will be one long Monday.»

But Isabel couldn't help wondering what had happened to the salmon they had for supper last night. She had meant to have fish mayonnaise for lunch and now...

Moira was asleep. Sleeping was her latest discovery. «It's so wonderful. One simply shuts one's eyes, that's all. It's so delicious.»

When the old ruddy postman came beating along the sandy road on his tricycle one felt the handle-bars ought to have been oars.

Bill Hunt put down his book. «Letter,» he said complacently, and they all waited. But, heartless postman–O malignant world! There was only one, a fat one for Isabel. Not even a paper.

«And mine's only from William,» said Isabel mournfully.

«From William–already?»

«He's sending you back your marriage lines as a gentle reminder.»

«Does everybody have marriage lines? I thought they were only for servants.»

«Pages and pages! Look at her! A Lady reading a Letter,» said Dennis.

My darling, precious Isabel. Pages and pages there were. As Isabel read on her feeling of astonishment changed to a stifled feeling. What on earth had induced William...? How extraordinary it was.... What could have made him...? She felt confused, more and more excited, even frightened. It was just like William. Was it? It was absurd, of course, it must be absurd, ridiculous. «Ha, ha, ha! Oh dear!» What was she to do? Isabel flung back in her chair and laughed till she couldn't stop laughing.

«Do, do tell us,» said the others. «You must tell us.»

«I'm longing to,» gurgled Isabel. She sat up, gathered the letter, and waved it at them. «Gather round,» she said. «Listen, it's too marvellous. A love-letter!»

«A love-letter! But how divine!» Darling, precious Isabel. But she had hardly begun before their laughter interrupted her.

«Go on, Isabel, it's perfect.»

«It's the most marvellous find.»

«Oh, do go on, Isabel!»

God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness.

«Oh! oh! oh!»

«Sh! sh! sh!»

And Isabel went on. When she reached the end they were hysterical: Bobby rolled on the turf and almost sobbed.

«You must let me have it just as it is, entire, for my new book,» said Dennis firmly. «I shall give it a whole chapter.»

«Oh, Isabel,» moaned Moira, «that wonderful bit about holding you in his arms!»

«I always thought those letters in divorce cases were made up. But they pale before this.»

«Let me hold it. Let me read it, mine own self,» said Bobby Kane.

But, to their surprise, Isabel crushed the letter in her hand. She was laughing no longer. She glanced quickly at them all; she looked exhausted. «No, not just now. Not just now,» she stammered.

And before they could recover she had run into the house, through the hall, up the stairs into her bedroom. Down she sat on the side of the bed. «How vile, odious, abominable, vulgar,» muttered Isabel. She pressed her eyes with her knuckles and rocked to and fro. And again she saw them, but not four, more like forty, laughing, sneering, jeering, stretching out their hands while she read them William's letter. Oh, what a loathsome thing to have done. How could she have done it! God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness. William! Isabel pressed her face into the pillow. But she felt that even the grave bedroom knew her for what she was, shallow, tinkling, vain....

Presently from the garden below there came voices.

«Isabel, we're all going for a bathe. Do come!»

«Come, thou wife of William!»

«Call her once before you go, call once yet!»

Isabel sat up. Now was the moment, now she must decide. Would she go with them, or stay here and write to William. Which, which should it be? «I must make up my mind.» Oh, but how could there be any question? Of course she would stay here and write.

«Titania!» piped Moira.

«Isa-bel?»

No, it was too difficult. «I'll–I'll go with them, and write to William later. Some other time. Later. Not now. But I shall certainly write,» thought Isabel hurriedly.

And, laughing, in the new way, she ran down the stairs.

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