

The Lady's Maid.

by Katherine Mansfield

Eleven o'clock. A knock at the door... I hope I haven't disturbed you, madam. You weren't asleep--were you? But I've just given my lady her tea, and there was such a nice cup over, I thought, perhaps...

... Not at all, madam. I always make a cup of tea last thing. She drinks it in bed after her prayers to warm her up. I put the kettle on when she kneels down and I say to it, "Now you needn't be in too much of a hurry to say your prayers." But it's always boiling before my lady is half through. You see, madam, we know such a lot of people, and they've all got to be prayed for--every one. My lady keeps a list of the names in a little red book. Oh dear! whenever some one new has been to see us and my lady says afterwards, "Ellen, give me my little red book," I feel quite wild, I do. "There's another," I think, "keeping her out of her bed in all weathers." And she won't have a cushion, you know, madam; she kneels on the hard carpet. It fidgets me something dreadful to see her, knowing her as I do. I've tried to cheat her; I've spread out the eiderdown. But the first time I did it--oh, she gave me such a look--holy it was, madam. "Did our Lord have an eiderdown, Ellen?" she said. But--I was younger at the time--I felt inclined to say, "No, but our Lord wasn't your age, and he didn't know what it was to have your lumbago." Wicked--wasn't it? But she's too good, you know, madam. When I tucked her up just now and seen--saw her lying back, her hands outside and her head on the pillow--so pretty--I couldn't help thinking, "Now you look just like your dear mother when I laid her out!"

... Yes, madam, it was all left to me. Oh, she did look sweet. I did her hair, soft-like, round her forehead, all in dainty curls, and just to one side of her neck I put a bunch of most beautiful purple pansies. Those pansies made a picture of her, madam! I shall never forget them. I thought to-night, when I looked at my lady, "Now, if only the pansies was there no one could tell the difference."

... Only the last year, madam. Only after she'd got a little--well--feeble as you might say. Of course, she was never dangerous; she was the sweetest old lady. But how it took her was--she thought she'd lost something. She couldn't keep still, she couldn't settle. All day long she'd be up and down, up and down; you'd meet her everywhere,--on

the stairs, in the porch, making for the kitchen. And she'd look up at you, and she'd say--just like a child, "I've lost it, I've lost it." "Come along," I'd say, "come along, and I'll lay out your patience for you." But she'd catch me by the hand--I was a favourite of hers--and whisper, "Find it for me, Ellen. Find it for me." Sad, wasn't it?

... No, she never recovered, madam. She had a stroke at the end. Last words she ever said was--very slow, "Look in--the--Look--in--" And then she was gone.

... No, madam, I can't say I noticed it. Perhaps some girls. But you see, it's like this, I've got nobody but my lady. My mother died of consumption when I was four, and I lived with my grandfather, who kept a hair-dresser's shop. I used to spend all my time in the shop under a table dressing my doll's hair--copying the assistants, I suppose. They were ever so kind to me. Used to make me little wigs, all colours, the latest fashions and all. And there I'd sit all day, quiet as quiet--the customers never knew. Only now and again I'd take my peep from under the table-cloth.

... But one day I managed to get a pair of scissors and--would you believe it, madam? I cut off all my hair; snipped it off all in bits, like the little monkey I was. Grandfather was furious! He caught hold of the tongs--I shall never forget it--grabbed me by the hand and shut my fingers in them. "That'll teach you!" he said. It was a fearful burn. I've got the mark of it to-day.

... Well, you see, madam, he'd taken such pride in my hair. He used to sit me up on the counter, before the customers came, and do it something beautiful--big, soft curls and waved over the top. I remember the assistants standing round, and me ever so solemn with the penny grandfather gave me to hold while it was being done... But he always took the penny back afterwards. Poor grandfather! Wild, he was, at the fright I'd made of myself. But he frightened me that time. Do you know what I did, madam? I ran away. Yes, I did, round the corners, in and out, I don't know how far I didn't run. Oh, dear, I must have looked a sight, with my hand rolled up in my pinny and my hair sticking out. People must have laughed when they saw me...

... No, madam, grandfather never got over it. He couldn't bear the sight of me after. Couldn't eat his dinner, even, if I was there. So my aunt took me. She was a cripple, an upholstress. Tiny! She had to

stand on the sofas when she wanted to cut out the backs. And it was helping her I met my lady...

... Not so very, madam. I was thirteen, turned. And I don't remember ever feeling--well--a child, as you might say. You see there was my uniform, and one thing and another. My lady put me into collars and cuffs from the first. Oh yes--once I did! That was--funny! It was like this. My lady had her two little nieces staying with her--we were at Sheldon at the time--and there was a fair on the common.

"Now, Ellen," she said, "I want you to take the two young ladies for a ride on the donkeys." Off we went; solemn little loves they were; each had a hand. But when we came to the donkeys they were too shy to go on. So we stood and watched instead. Beautiful those donkeys were! They were the first I'd seen out of a cart--for pleasure as you might say. They were a lovely silver-grey, with little red saddles and blue bridles and bells jing-a-jingling on their ears. And quite big girls--older than me, even--were riding them, ever so gay. Not at all common, I don't mean, madam, just enjoying themselves. And I don't know what it was, but the way the little feet went, and the eyes--so gentle--and the soft ears--made me want to go on a donkey more than anything in the world!

... Of course, I couldn't. I had my young ladies. And what would I have looked like perched up there in my uniform? But all the rest of the day it was donkeys--donkeys on the brain with me. I felt I should have burst if I didn't tell some one; and who was there to tell? But when I went to bed--I was sleeping in Mrs. James's bedroom, our cook that was, at the time--as soon as the lights was out, there they were, my donkeys, jingling along, with their neat little feet and sad eyes... Well, madam, would you believe it, I waited for a long time and pretended to be asleep, and then suddenly I sat up and called out as loud as I could, "I do want to go on a donkey. I do want a donkey-ride!" You see, I had to say it, and I thought they wouldn't laugh at me if they knew I was only dreaming. Artful--wasn't it? Just what a silly child would think...

... No, madam, never now. Of course, I did think of it at one time. But it wasn't to be. He had a little flower-shop just down the road and across from where we was living. Funny--wasn't it? And me such a one for flowers. We were having a lot of company at the time, and I was in and out of the shop more often than not, as the saying is. And

Harry and I (his name was Harry) got to quarrelling about how things ought to be arranged--and that began it. Flowers! you wouldn't believe it, madam, the flowers he used to bring me. He'd stop at nothing. It was lilies-of-the-valley more than once, and I'm not exaggerating! Well, of course, we were going to be married and live over the shop, and it was all going to be just so, and I was to have the window to arrange... Oh, how I've done that window of a Saturday! Not really, of course, madam, just dreaming, as you might say. I've done it for Christmas--motto in holly, and all--and I've had my Easter lilies with a gorgeous star all daffodils in the middle. I've hung--well, that's enough of that. The day came he was to call for me to choose the furniture. Shall I ever forget it? It was a Tuesday. My lady wasn't quite herself that afternoon. Not that she'd said anything, of course; she never does or will. But I knew by the way that she kept wrapping herself up and asking me if it was cold--and her little nose looked... pinched. I didn't like leaving her; I knew I'd be worrying all the time. At last I asked her if she'd rather I put it off. "Oh no, Ellen," she said, "you mustn't mind about me. You mustn't disappoint your young man." And so cheerful, you know, madam, never thinking about herself. It made me feel worse than ever. I began to wonder... then she dropped her handkerchief and began to stoop down to pick it up herself--a thing she never did. "Whatever are you doing!" I cried, running to stop her. "Well," she said, smiling, you know, madam, "I shall have to begin to practise." Oh, it was all I could do not to burst out crying. I went over to the dressing-table and made believe to rub up the silver, and I couldn't keep myself in, and I asked her if she'd rather I... didn't get married. "No, Ellen," she said--that was her voice, madam, like I'm giving you--"No, Ellen, not for the wide world!" But while she said it, madam--I was looking in her glass; of course, she didn't know I could see her--she put her little hand on her heart just like her dear mother used to, and lifted her eyes... Oh, madam!

When Harry came I had his letters all ready, and the ring and a ducky little brooch he'd given me--a silver bird it was, with a chain in its beak, and on the end of the chain a heart with a dagger. Quite the thing! I opened the door to him. I never gave him time for a word. "There you are," I said. "Take them all back," I said, "it's all over. I'm not going to marry you," I said, "I can't leave my lady." White! he turned as white as a woman. I had to slam the door, and there I stood, all of a tremble, till I knew he had gone. When I opened the door--believe me or not, madam--that man was gone! I ran out into the road just as I was, in my apron and my house-shoes, and there I stayed in

the middle of the road... staring. People must have laughed if they saw me...

... Goodness gracious!--What's that? It's the clock striking! And here I've been keeping you awake. Oh, madam, you ought to have stopped me... Can I tuck in your feet? I always tuck in my lady's feet, every night, just the same. And she says, "Good night, Ellen. Sleep sound and wake early!" I don't know what I should do if she didn't say that, now.

... Oh dear, I sometimes think... whatever should I do if anything were to... But, there, thinking's no good to any one--is it, madam? Thinking won't help. Not that I do it often. And if ever I do I pull myself up sharp, "Now, then, Ellen. At it again--you silly girl! If you can't find anything better to do than to start thinking!... "