



A BIRTHDAY (1911)

By Katherine Mansfield

Andreas Binzer woke slowly. He turned over on the narrow bed and stretched himself – yawned – opening his mouth as widely as possible and bringing his teeth together afterwards with a sharp "click." The sound of that click fascinated him; he repeated it quickly several times, with a snapping movement of the jaws. What teeth! he thought. Sound as a bell, every man jack of them. Never had one out, never had one stopped. That comes of no tomfoolery in eating, and a good regular brushing night and morning. He raised himself on his left elbow and waved his right arm over the side of the bed to feel for the chair where he put his watch and chain overnight. No chair was there – of course, he'd forgotten, there wasn't a chair in this wretched spare room. Had to put the confounded thing under his pillow. "Half-past eight, Sunday, breakfast at nine – time for the bath" – his brain ticked to the watch. He sprang out of bed and went over to the window. The venetian blind was broken, hung fan-shaped over the upper pane . . . "That blind must be mended. I'll get the office boy to drop in and fix it on his way home tomorrow – he's a good hand at blinds. Give him twopence and he'll do it as well as a carpenter . . . Anna could do it herself if she was all right. So would I, for the matter of that, but I don't like to trust myself on rickety step-ladders." He looked up at the sky: it shone, strangely white, unflecked with cloud; he looked down at the row of garden strips and backyards. The fence of these gardens was built along the edge of a gully, spanned by an iron suspension bridge, and the people had a wretched habit of throwing their empty tins over the fence into the gully. Just like them, of course! Andreas started counting the tins, and decided, viciously, to write a letter to the papers about it and sign it – sign it in full.

The servant girl came out of their back door into the yard, carrying his boots. She threw one down on the ground, thrust her hand into the other, and stared at it, sucking in her cheeks. Suddenly she bent forward, spat on the toecap, and started polishing with a brush rooted out of her apron pocket. . . . "Slut of a girl! Heaven knows what infectious disease may be breeding now in that boot. Anna must get rid of that girl – even if she has to do without one for a bit – as soon as she's up and about again. The way she chucked one boot down and then spat upon the other! She didn't care whose boots she'd got hold of. *She* had no false notions of the respect due to the master of the house." He turned away from the window and switched his bath towel from the washstand rail, sick at heart. "I'm too sensitive for a man – that's what's the matter with me. Have been from the beginning, and will be to the end."

There was a gentle knock at the door and his mother came in. She closed the door after her and leant against it. Andreas noticed that her cap was crooked, and a long tail of hair hung over her shoulder. He went forward and kissed her.

"Good morning, mother; how's Anna?"



The old woman spoke quickly, clasping and unclasping her hands.

"Andreas, please go to Doctor Erb as soon as you are dressed."

"Why," he said, "is she bad?"

Frau Binzer nodded, and Andreas, watching her, saw her face suddenly change; a fine network of wrinkles seemed to pull over it from under the skin surface.

"Sit down on the bed a moment," he said. "Been up all night?"

"Yes. No, I won't sit down, I must go back to her. Anna has been in pain all night. She wouldn't have you disturbed before because she said you looked so run down yesterday. You told her you had caught a cold and been very worried."

Straightway Andreas felt that he was being accused.

"Well, she made me tell her, worried it out of me; you know the way she does."

Again Frau Binzer nodded.

"Oh yes, I know. She says, is your cold better, and there's a warm undervest for you in the left-hand corner of the big drawer."

Quite automatically Andreas cleared his throat twice.

"Yes," he answered. "Tell her my throat certainly feels looser. I suppose I'd better not disturb her?"

"No, and besides, *time*, Andreas."

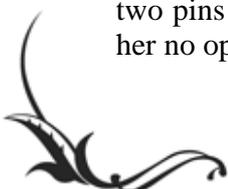
"I'll be ready in five minutes."

They went into the passage. As Frau Binzer opened the door of the front bedroom, a long wail came from the room.

That shocked and terrified Andreas. He dashed into the bathroom, turned on both taps as far as they would go, cleaned his teeth and pared his nails while the water was running.

"Frightful business, frightful business," he heard himself whispering. "And I can't understand it. It isn't as though it were her first – it's her third. Old Schafer told me, yesterday, his wife simply 'dropped' her fourth. Anna ought to have had a qualified nurse. Mother gives way to her. Mother spoils her. I wonder what she meant by saying I'd worried Anna yesterday. Nice remark to make to a husband at a time like this. Unstrung, I suppose – and my sensitiveness again."

When he went into the kitchen for his boots, the servant girl was bent over the stove, cooking breakfast. "Breathing into that, now, I suppose," thought Andreas, and was very short with the servant girl. She did not notice. She was full of terrified joy and importance in the goings on upstairs. She felt she was learning the secrets of life with every breath she drew. Had laid the table that morning saying, "Boy," as she put down the first dish, "Girl," as she placed the second – it had worked out with the saltspoon to "Boy." "For two pins I'd tell the master that, to comfort him, like," she decided. But the Master gave her no opening.



"Put an extra cup and saucer on the table," he said; "the doctor may want some coffee."

"The doctor, sir?" The servant girl whipped a spoon out of a pan, and spilt two drops of grease on the stove. "Shall I fry something extra?" But the master had gone, slamming the door after him. He walked down the street – there was nobody about at all – dead and alive this place on a Sunday morning. As he crossed the suspension bridge a strong stench of fennel and decayed refuse streamed from the gulley, and again Andreas began concocting a letter. He turned into the main road. The shutters were still up before the shops. Scraps of newspaper, hay, and fruit skins strewed the pavement; the gutters were choked with the leavings of Saturday night. Two dogs sprawled in the middle of the road, scuffling and biting. Only the public-house at the corner was open; a young barman slopped water over the doorstep.

Fastidiously, his lips curling, Andreas picked his way through the water. "Extraordinary how I am noticing things this morning. It's partly the effect of Sunday. I loathe a Sunday when Anna's tied by the leg and the children are away. On Sunday a man has the right to expect his family. Everything here's filthy, the whole place might be down with the plague, and will be, too, if this street's not swept away. I'd like to have a hand on the government ropes." He braced his shoulders. "Now for this doctor."

"Doctor Erb is at breakfast," the maid informed him. She showed him into the waiting-room, a dark and musty place, with some ferns under a glass-case by the window. "He says he won't be a minute, please, sir, and there is a paper on the table."

"Unhealthy hole," thought Binzer, walking over to the window and drumming his fingers on the glass fern-shade. "At breakfast, is he? That's the mistake I made: turning out early on an empty stomach."

A milk cart rattled down the street, the driver standing at the back, cracking a whip; he wore an immense geranium flower stuck in the lapel of his coat. Firm as a rock he stood, bending back a little in the swaying cart. Andreas craned his neck to watch him all the way down the road, even after he had gone, listening for the sharp sound of those rattling cans.

"H'm, not much wrong with him," he reflected. "Wouldn't mind a taste of that life myself. Up early, work all over by eleven o'clock, nothing to do but loaf about all day until milking time." Which he knew was an exaggeration, but he wanted to pity himself.

The maid opened the door, and stood aside for Doctor Erb. Andreas wheeled round; the two men shook hands.

"Well, Binzer," said the doctor jovially, brushing some crumbs from a pearl-coloured waistcoat, "son and heir becoming importunate?"

Up went Binzer's spirits with a bound. Son and heir, by Jove! He was glad to have to deal with a man again. And a sane fellow this, who came across this sort of thing every day of the week.

"That's about the measure of it, Doctor," he answered, smiling and picking up his hat. "Mother dragged me out of bed this morning with imperative orders to bring you along."



"Gig will be round in a minute. Drive back with me, won't you? Extraordinary, sultry day; you're as red as a beetroot already."

Andreas affected to laugh. The doctor had one annoying habit – imagined he had the right to poke fun at everybody simply because he was a doctor. "The man's riddled with conceit, like all these professionals," Andreas decided.

"What sort of night did Frau Binzer have?" asked the doctor. "Ah, here's the gig. Tell me on the way up. Sit as near the middle as you can, will you, Binzer? Your weight tilts it over a bit one side – that's the worst of you successful business men."

"Two stone heavier than I, if he's a pound," thought Andreas. "The man may be all right in his profession – but heaven preserve me."

"Off you go, my beauty." Doctor Erb flicked the little brown mare. "Did your wife get any sleep last night?"

"No; I don't think she did," answered Andreas shortly. "To tell you the truth, I'm not satisfied that she hasn't a nurse."

"Oh, your mother's worth a dozen nurses," cried the doctor, with immense gusto. "To tell you the truth, I'm not keen on nurses – too raw – raw as rump-steak. They wrestle for a baby as though they were wrestling with Death for the body of Patroclus. . . . Ever seen that picture by an English artist. Leighton? Wonderful thing – full of sinew!"

"There he goes again," thought Andreas, "airing off his knowledge to make a fool of me."

"Now your mother – she's firm – she's capable. Does what she's told with a fund of sympathy. Look at these shops we're passing – they're festering sores. How on earth this government can tolerate –"

"They're not so bad – sound enough – only want a coat of paint."

The doctor whistled a little tune and flicked the mare again.

"Well, I hope the young shaver won't give his mother too much trouble," he said. "Here we are."

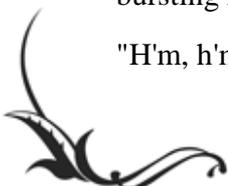
A skinny little boy, who had been sliding up and down the back seat of the gig, sprang out and held the horse's head. Andreas went straight into the dining-room and left the servant girl to take the doctor upstairs. He sat down, poured out some coffee, and bit through half a roll before helping himself to fish. Then he noticed there was no hot plate for the fish – the whole house was at sixes and sevens. He rang the bell, but the servant girl came in with a tray holding a bowl of soup and a hot plate.

"I've been keeping them on the stove," she simpered.

"Ah, thanks, that's very kind of you." As he swallowed the soup his heart warmed to this fool of a girl.

"Oh, it's a good thing Doctor Erb has come," volunteered the servant girl, who was bursting for want of sympathy.

"H'm, h'm," said Andreas.



She waited a moment, expectantly, rolling her eyes, then in full loathing of mankind went back to the kitchen and vowed herself to sterility.

Andreas cleared the soup bowl, and cleared the fish. As he ate, the room slowly darkened. A faint wind sprang up and beat the tree branches against the window. The dining-room looked over the breakwater of the harbour, and the sea swung heavily in rolling waves. Wind crept round the house, moaning drearily.

"We're in for a storm. That means I'm boxed up here all day. Well, there's one blessing; it'll clear the air." He heard the servant girl rushing importantly round the house, slamming windows. Then he caught a glimpse of her in the garden, unpegging tea towels from the line across the lawn. She was a worker, there was no doubt about that. He took up a book, and wheeled his arm-chair over to the window. But it was useless. Too dark to read; he didn't believe in straining his eyes, and gas at ten o'clock in the morning seemed absurd. So he slipped down in the chair, leaned his elbows on the padded arms and gave himself up, for once, to idle dreaming. "A boy? Yes, it was bound to be a boy this time. . . ." "What's your family, Binzer?" "Oh, I've two girls and a boy!" A very nice little number. Of course he was the last man to have a favourite child, but a man needed a son. "I'm working up the business for my son! Binzer & Son! It would mean living very tight for the next ten years, cutting expenses as fine as possible; and then –"

A tremendous gust of wind sprang upon the house, seized it, shook it, dropped, only to grip the more tightly. The waves swelled up along the breakwater and were whipped with broken foam. Over the white sky flew tattered streamers of grey cloud.

Andreas felt quite relieved to hear Doctor Erb coming down the stairs; he got up and lit the gas.

"Mind if I smoke in here?" asked Doctor Erb, lighting a cigarette before Andreas had time to answer. "You don't smoke, do you? No time to indulge in pernicious little habits!"

"How is she now?" asked Andreas, loathing the man.

"Oh, well as can be expected, poor little soul. She begged me to come down and have a look at you. Said she knew you were worrying." With laughing eyes the doctor looked at the breakfast-table. "Managed to peck a bit, I see, eh?"

"Hoo-wih!" shouted the wind, shaking the window-sashes.

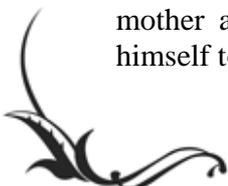
"Pity – this weather," said Doctor Erb.

"Yes, it gets on Anna's nerves, and it's just nerve she wants."

"Eh, what's that?" retorted the doctor. "Nerve! Man alive! She's got twice the nerve of you and me rolled into one. Nerve! she's nothing but nerve. A woman who works as she does about the house and has three children in four years thrown in with the dusting, so to speak!"

He pitched his half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace and frowned at the window.

"Now *he's* accusing me," thought Andreas. "That's the second time this morning – first mother and now this man taking advantage of my sensitiveness." He could not trust himself to speak, and rang the bell for the servant girl.



"Clear away the breakfast things," he ordered. "I can't have them messing about on the table till dinner!"

"Don't be hard on the girl," coaxed Doctor Erb. "She's got twice the work to do to-day."

At that Binzer's anger blazed out.

"I'll trouble you, Doctor, not to interfere between me and my servants!" And he felt a fool at the same moment for not saying "servant."

Doctor Erb was not perturbed. He shook his head, thrust his hands into his pockets, and began balancing himself on toe and heel.

"You're jagged by the weather," he said wryly, "nothing else. A great pity – this storm. You know climate has an immense effect upon birth. A fine day perks a woman – gives her heart for her business. Good weather is as necessary to a confinement as it is to a washing day. Not bad – that last remark of mine – for a professional fossil, eh?"

Andreas made no reply.

"Well, I'll be getting back to my patient. Why don't you take a walk, and clear your head? That's the idea for you."

"No," he answered, "I won't do that; it's too rough."

He went back to his chair by the window. While the servant girl cleared away he pretended to read... then his dreams! It seemed years since he had had the time to himself to dream like that – he never had a breathing space. Saddled with work all day, and couldn't shake it off in the evening like other men. Besides, Anna was interested – they talked of practically nothing else together. Excellent mother she'd make for a boy; she had a grip of things.

Church bells started ringing through the windy air, now sounding as though from very far away, then again as though all the churches in the town had been suddenly transplanted into their street. They stirred something in him, those bells, something vague and tender. Just about that time Anna would call him from the hall. "Andreas, come and have your coat brushed. I'm ready." Then off they would go, she hanging on his arm, and looking up at him. She certainly was a little thing. He remembered once saying when they were engaged, "Just as high as my heart," and she had jumped on to a stool and pulled his head down, laughing. A kid in those days, younger than her children in nature, brighter, more "go" and "spirit" in her. The way she'd run down the road to meet him after business! And the way she laughed when they were looking for a house. By Jove! that laugh of hers! At the memory he grinned, then grew suddenly grave. Marriage certainly changed a woman far more than it did a man. Talk about sobering down. She had lost all her go in two months! Well, once this boy business was over she'd get stronger. He began to plan a little trip for them. He'd take her away and they'd loaf about together somewhere. After all, dash it, they were young still. She'd got into a groove; he'd have to force her out of it, that's all.

He got up and went into the drawing-room, carefully shut the door and took Anna's photograph from the top of the piano. She wore a white dress with a big bow of some soft stuff under the chin, and stood, a little stiffly, holding a sheaf of artificial poppies and



corn in her hands. Delicate she looked even then; her masses of hair gave her that look. She seemed to droop under the heavy braids of it, and yet she was smiling. Andreas caught his breath sharply. She was his wife – that girl. Posh! it had only been taken four years ago. He held it close to him, bent forward and kissed it. Then rubbed the glass with the back of his hand. At that moment, fainter than he had heard in the passage, more terrifying, Andreas heard again that wailing cry. The wind caught it up in mocking echo, blew it over the house-tops, down the street, far away from him. He flung out his arms, "I'm so damnably helpless," he said, and then, to the picture, "Perhaps it's not as bad as it sounds; perhaps it is just my sensitiveness." In the half light of the drawing-room the smile seemed to deepen in Anna's portrait, and to become secret, even cruel. "No," he reflected, "that smile is not at all her happiest expression – it was a mistake to let her have it taken smiling like that. She doesn't look like my wife –like the mother of my son." Yes, that was it, she did not look like the mother of a son who was going to be a partner in the firm. The picture got on his nerves; he held it in different lights, looked at it from a distance, sideways, spent, it seemed to Andreas afterwards, a whole lifetime trying to fit it in. The more he played with it the deeper grew his dislike of it. Thrice he carried it over to the fireplace and decided to chuck it behind the Japanese umbrella in the grate; then he thought it absurd to waste an expensive frame. There was no good in beating about the bush. Anna looked like a stranger – abnormal, a freak – it might be a picture taken just before or after death.

Suddenly he realised that the wind had dropped, that the whole house was still, terribly still. Cold and pale, with a disgusting feeling that spiders were creeping up his spine and across his face, he stood in the centre of the drawing-room, hearing Doctor Erb's footsteps descending the stairs.

He saw Doctor Erb come into the room; the room seemed to change into a great glass bowl that spun round, and Doctor Erb seemed to swim through this glass bowl towards him, like a goldfish in a pearl-coloured waistcoat.

"My beloved wife has passed away!" He wanted to shout it out before the doctor spoke.

"Well, she's hooked a boy this time!" said Doctor Erb. Andreas staggered forward.

"Look out. Keep on your pins," said Doctor Erb, catching Dinzer's arm, and murmuring, as he felt it, "Flabby as butter."

A glow spread all over Andreas. He was exultant.

"Well, by God! Nobody can accuse *me* of not knowing what suffering is," he said.

