



AN INDISCREET JOURNEY (1915)

By Katherine Mansfield

She is like St. Anne. Yes, the concierge is the image of St. Anne, with that black cloth over her head, the wisps of grey hair hanging, and the tiny smoking lamp in her hand. Really very beautiful, I thought, smiling at St. Anne, who said severely: "Six o'clock. You have only just got time. There is a bowl of milk on the writing table." I jumped out of my pyjamas and into a basin of cold water like any English lady in any French novel. The concierge, persuaded that I was on my way to prison cells and death by bayonets, opened the shutters and the cold clear light came through. A little steamer hooted on the river; a cart with two horses at a gallop flung past. The rapid swirling water; the tall black trees on the far side, grouped together like negroes conversing. Sinister, very, I thought, as I buttoned on my age-old Burberry. (That Burberry was very significant. It did not belong to me. I had borrowed it from a friend. My eye lighted upon it hanging in her little dark hall. The very thing! The perfect and adequate disguise—an old Burberry. Lions have been faced in a Burberry. Ladies have been rescued from open boats in mountainous seas wrapped in nothing else. An old Burberry seems to me the sign and the token of the undisputed venerable traveller, I decided, leaving my purple peg-top with the real seal collar and cuffs in exchange.)

"You will never get there," said the concierge, watching me turn up the collar. "Never! Never!" I ran down the echoing stairs—strange they sounded, like a piano flicked by a sleepy housemaid—and on to the Quai. "Why so fast, *ma mignonne*?" said a lovely little boy in coloured socks, dancing in front of the electric lotus buds that curve over the entrance to the Métro. Alas! there was not even time to blow him a kiss. When I arrived at the big station I had only four minutes to spare, and the platform entrance was crowded and packed with soldiers, their yellow papers in one hand and big untidy bundles. The Commissaire of Police stood on one side, a Nameless Official on the other. Will he let me pass? Will he? He was an old man with a fat swollen face covered with big warts. Horn-rimmed spectacles squatted on his nose. Trembling, I made an effort. I conjured up my sweetest early-morning smile and handed it with the papers. But the delicate thing fluttered against the horn spectacles and fell. Nevertheless, he let me pass, and I ran, ran in and out among the soldiers and up the high steps into the yellow-painted carriage.

"Does one go direct to X?" I asked the collector who dug at my ticket with a pair of forceps and handed it back again. "No, Mademoiselle, you must change at X.Y.Z."

"At—?"

"X.Y.Z."

Again I had not heard. "At what time do we arrive there if you please?"



“One o'clock.” But that was no good to me. I hadn't a watch. Oh, well—later.

Ah! the train had begun to move. The train was on my side. It swung out of the station, and soon we were passing the vegetable gardens, passing the tall blind houses to let, passing the servants beating carpets. Up already and walking in the fields, rosy from the rivers and the red-fringed pools, the sun lighted upon the swinging train and stroked my muff and told me to take off that Burberry. I was not alone in the carriage. An old woman sat opposite, her skirt turned back over her knees, a bonnet of black lace on her head. In her fat hands, adorned with a wedding and two mourning rings, she held a letter. Slowly, slowly she sipped a sentence, and then looked up and out of the window, her lips trembling a little, and then another sentence, and again the old face turned to the light, tasting it ... Two soldiers leaned out of the window, their heads nearly touching—one of them was whistling, the other had his coat fastened with some rusty safety-pins. And now there were soldiers everywhere working on the railway line, leaning against trucks or standing hands on hips, eyes fixed on the train as though they expected at least one camera at every window. And now we were passing big wooden sheds like rigged up dancing halls or seaside pavilions, each flying a flag. In and out of them walked the Red Cross men; the wounded sat against the walls sunning themselves. At all the bridges, the crossings, the stations, a *petit soldat*, all boots and bayonet. Forlorn and desolate he looked,—like a little comic picture waiting for the joke to be written underneath. Is there really such a thing as war? Are all these laughing voices really going to the war? These dark woods lighted so mysteriously by the white stems of the birch and the ash—these watery fields with the big birds flying over—these rivers green and blue in the light—have battles been fought in places like these?

What beautiful cemeteries we are passing! They flash gay in the sun. They seem to be full of cornflowers and poppies and daisies. How can there be so many flowers at this time of the year? But they are not flowers at all. They are bunches of ribbons tied on to the soldiers' graves

I glanced up and caught the old woman's eye. She smiled and folded the letter. “It is from my son—the first we have had since October. I am taking it to my daughter-in-law.”

“?”

“Yes, very good,” said the old woman, shaking down her skirt and putting her arm through the handle of her basket. “He wants me to send him some handkerchieves and a piece of stout string.”

What is the name of the station where I have to change? Perhaps I shall never know. I got up and leaned my arms across the window rail, my feet crossed. One cheek burned as in infancy on the way to the sea-side. When the war is over I shall have a barge and drift along these rivers with a white cat and a pot of mignonette to bear me company.

Down the side of the hill filed the troops, winking red and blue in the light. Far away, but plainly to be seen, some more flew by on bicycles. But really, *ma France adorée*, this uniform is ridiculous. Your soldiers are stamped upon your bosom like bright irreverent transfers.



The train slowed down, stopped ... Everybody was getting out except me. A big boy, his sabots tied to his back with a piece of string, the inside of his tin wine cup stained a lovely impossible pink, looked very friendly. Does one change here perhaps for X? Another whose képi had come out of a wet paper cracker swung my suit-case to earth. What darlings soldiers are! “Merci bien, Monsieur, vous êtes tout à fait aimable ...” “Not this way,” said a bayonet. “Nor this,” said another. So I followed the crowd. “Your passport, Mademoiselle ...” “We, *Sir Edward Grey* ...” I ran through the muddy square and into the buffet.

A green room with a stove jutting out and tables on each side. On the counter, beautiful with coloured bottles, a woman leans, her breasts in her folded arms. Through an open door I can see a kitchen, and the cook in a white coat breaking eggs into a bowl and tossing the shells into a corner. The blue and red coats of the men who are eating hang upon the walls. Their short swords and belts are piled upon chairs. Heavens! what a noise. The sunny air seemed all broken up and trembling with it. A little boy, very pale, swung from table to table, taking the orders, and poured me out a glass of purple coffee. *Ssss*, came from the eggs. They were in a pan. The woman rushed from behind the counter and began to help the boy. *Toute de suite, tout' suite!* she chirruped to the loud impatient voices. There came a clatter of plates and the poppop of corks being drawn.

Suddenly in the doorway I saw someone with a pail of fish—brown speckled fish, like the fish one sees in a glass case, swimming through forests of beautiful pressed sea-weed. He was an old man in a tattered jacket, standing humbly, waiting for someone to attend to him. A thin beard fell over his chest, his eyes under the tufted eyebrows were bent on the pail he carried. He looked as though he had escaped from some holy picture, and was entreating the soldiers' pardon for being there at all ...

But what could I have done? I could not arrive at X with two fishes hanging on a straw; and I am sure it is a penal offence in France to throw fish out of railway-carriage windows, I thought, miserably climbing into a smaller, shabbier train. Perhaps I might have taken them to—*ah, mon Dieu*—I had forgotten the name of my uncle and aunt again! Buffard, Buffon—what was it? Again I read the unfamiliar letter in the familiar handwriting.

“My dear niece,

“Now that the weather is more settled, your uncle and I would be charmed if you would pay us a little visit. Telegraph me when you are coming. I shall meet you outside the station if I am free. Otherwise our good friend, Madame Grinçon, who lives in the little toll-house by the bridge, *juste en face de la gare*, will conduct you to our home. *Je vous embrasse bien tendrement*, Julie Boiffard.”

A visiting card was enclosed: *M. Paul Boiffard*.

Boiffard—of course that was the name. *Ma tante Julie et mon oncle Paul*—suddenly they were there with me, more real, more solid than any relations I had ever known. I saw *tante Julie* bridling, with the soup-tureen in her hands, and *oncle Paul* sitting at the table, with a red and white napkin tied round his neck. Boiffard—Boiffard—I must remember



the name. Supposing the Commissaire Militaire should ask me who the relations were I was going to and I muddled the name—Oh, how fatal! Buffard—no, Boiffard. And then for the first time, folding Aunt Julie's letter, I saw scrawled in a corner of the empty back page: *Venez vite, vite*. Strange impulsive woman! My heart began to beat ...

“Ah, we are not far off now,” said the lady opposite. “You are going to X, Mademoiselle?”

“Oui, Madame.”

“I also ... You have been there before?”

“No, Madame. This is the first time.”

“Really, it is a strange time for a visit.”

I smiled faintly, and tried to keep my eyes off her hat. She was quite an ordinary little woman, but she wore a black velvet toque, with an incredibly surprised looking sea-gull camped on the very top of it. Its round eyes, fixed on me so inquiringly, were almost too much to bear. I had a dreadful impulse to shoo it away, or to lean forward and inform her of its presence ...

“*Excusez-moi, madame*, but perhaps you have not remarked there is an *espèce de* sea-gull *couché sur votre chapeau*.”

Could the bird be there on purpose? I must not laugh ... I must not laugh. Had she ever looked at herself in a glass with that bird on her head?

“It is very difficult to get into X at present, to pass the station,” she said, and she shook her head with the sea-gull at me. “Ah, such an affair. One must sign one's name and state one's business.”

“Really, is it as bad as all that?”

“But naturally. You see the whole place is in the hands of the military, and”—she shrugged—“they have to be strict. Many people do not get beyond the station at all. They arrive. They are put in the waiting-room, and there they remain.”

Did I or did I not detect in her voice a strange, insulting relish?

“I suppose such strictness is absolutely necessary,” I said coldly, stroking my muff.

“Necessary,” she cried. “I should think so. Why, *mademoiselle*, you cannot imagine what it would be like otherwise! You know what women are like about soldiers”—she raised a final hand—“mad, completely mad. But—” and she gave a little laugh of triumph—“they could not get into X. *Mon Dieu*, no! There is no question about that.”

“I don't suppose they even try,” said I.



“Don't you?” said the sea-gull.

Madame said nothing for a moment. “Of course the authorities are very hard on the men. It means instant imprisonment, and then—off to the firing-line without a word.”

“What are *you* going to X for?” said the sea-gull. “What on earth are *you* doing here?”

“Are you making a long stay in X, *mademoiselle*?”

She had won, she had won. I was terrified. A lamp-post swam past the train with the fatal name upon it. I could hardly breathe—the train had stopped. I smiled gaily at Madame and danced down the steps to the platform ...

It was a hot little room completely furnished with two colonels seated at two tables. They were large grey-whiskered men with a touch of burnt red on their cheeks. Sumptuous and omnipotent they looked. One smoked what ladies love to call a heavy Egyptian cigarette, with a long creamy ash, the other toyed with a gilded pen. Their heads rolled on their tight collars, like big over-ripe fruits. I had a terrible feeling, as I handed my passport and ticket, that a soldier would step forward and tell me to kneel. I would have knelt without question.

“What's this?” said God I., querulously. He did not like my passport at all. The very sight of it seemed to annoy him. He waved a dissenting hand at it, with a “*Non, je ne peux pas manger ça*” air.

“But it won't do. It won't do at all, you know. Look,—read for yourself,” and he glanced with extreme distaste at my photograph, and then with even greater distaste his pebble eyes looked at me.

“Of course the photograph is deplorable,” I said, scarcely breathing with terror, “but it has been viséd and viséd.”

He raised his big bulk and went over to God II.

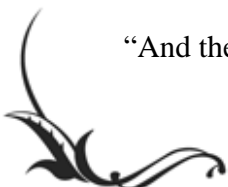
“Courage!” I said to my muff and held it firmly, “Courage!”

God II. held up a finger to me, and I produced Aunt Julie's letter and her card. But he did not seem to feel the slightest interest in her. He stamped my passport idly, scribbled a word on my ticket, and I was on the platform again.

“That way—you pass out that way.”

Terribly pale, with a faint smile on his lips, his hand at salute, stood the little corporal. I gave no sign, I am sure I gave no sign. He stepped behind me.

“And then follow me as though you do not see me,” I heard him half whisper, half sing.



How fast he went, through the slippery mud towards a bridge. He had a postman's bag on his back, a paper parcel and the *Matin* in his hand. We seemed to dodge through a maze of policemen, and I could not keep up at all with the little corporal who began to whistle. From the toll-house "our good friend, Madame Grinçon," her hands wrapped in a shawl, watched our coming, and against the toll-house there leaned a tiny faded cab. *Montez vite, vite!* said the little corporal, hurling my suit-case, the postman's bag, the paper parcel and the *Matin* on to the floor.

"A-ie! A-ie! Do not be so mad. Do not ride yourself. You will be seen," wailed "our good friend, Madame Grinçon."

"Ah, je m'en f ..." said the little corporal.

The driver jerked into activity. He lashed the bony horse and away we flew, both doors, which were the complete sides of the cab, flapping and banging

"Bon jour, mon amie."

"Bon jour, mon ami."

And then we swooped down and clutched at the banging doors. They would not keep shut. They were fools of doors.

"Lean back, let me do it!" I cried. "Policemen are as thick as violets everywhere."

At the barracks the horse reared up and stopped. A crowd of laughing faces blotted the window.

"Prends ça, mon vieux," said the little corporal, handing the paper parcel.

"It's all right," called someone.

We waved, we were off again. By a river, down a strange white street, with little houses on either side, gay in the late sunlight.

"Jump out as soon as he stops again. The door will be open. Run straight inside. I will follow. The man is already paid. I know you will like the house. It is quite white, and the room is white, too, and the people are—"

"White as snow."

We looked at each other. We began to laugh. "Now," said the little corporal.

Out I flew and in at the door. There stood, presumably, my aunt Julie. There in the background hovered, I supposed, my uncle Paul.

"Bon jour, madame!" "Bon jour, monsieur!"



“It is all right, you are safe,” said my aunt Julie. Heavens, how I loved her! And she opened the door of the white room and shut it upon us. Down went the suit-case, the postman's bag, the *Matin*. I threw my passport up into the air, and the little corporal caught it.

* * *

What an extraordinary thing. We had been there to lunch and to dinner each day; but now in the dusk and alone I could not find it. I clop-clopped in my borrowed *sabots* through the greasy mud, right to the end of the village, and there was not a sign of it. I could not even remember what it looked like, or if there was a name painted on the outside, or any bottles or tables showing at the window. Already the village houses were sealed for the night behind big wooden shutters. Strange and mysterious they looked in the ragged drifting light and thin rain, like a company of beggars perched on the hill-side, their bosoms full of rich unlawful gold. There was nobody about but the soldiers. A group of wounded stood under a lamp-post, petting a mangy, shivering dog. Up the street came four big boys singing:

Dodo, mon homme, fais vit' dodo ...

and swung off down the hill to their sheds behind the railway station. They seemed to take the last breath of the day with them. I began to walk slowly back.

“It must have been one of these houses. I remember it stood far back from the road—and there were no steps, not even a porch—one seemed to walk right through the window.” And then quite suddenly the waiting-boy came out of just such a place. He saw me and grinned cheerfully, and began to whistle through his teeth.

“Bon soir, mon petit.”

“Bon soir, madame.” And he followed me up the café to our special table, right at the far end by the window, and marked by a bunch of violets that I had left in a glass there yesterday.

“You are two?” asked the waiting-boy, flicking the table with a red and white cloth. His long swinging steps echoed over the bare floor. He disappeared into the kitchen and came back to light the lamp that hung from the ceiling under a spreading shade, like a haymaker's hat. Warm light shone on the empty place that was really a barn, set out with dilapidated tables and chairs. Into the middle of the room a black stove jutted. At one side of it there was a table with a row of bottles on it, behind which Madame sat and took the money and made entries in a red book. Opposite her desk a door led into the kitchen. The walls were covered with a creamy paper patterned all over with green and swollen trees—hundreds and hundreds of trees reared their mushroom heads to the ceiling. I began to wonder who had chosen the paper and why. Did Madame think it was beautiful, or that it was a gay and lovely thing to eat one's dinner at all seasons in the middle of a forest... On either side of the clock there hung a picture: one, a young gentleman in black tights wooing a pear-shaped lady in yellow over the back of a garden seat, *Premier Rencontre*; two, the black and yellow in amorous confusion, *Triomphe d'Amour*.



The clock ticked to a soothing lilt, *C'est ça, c'est ça*. In the kitchen the waiting-boy was washing up. I heard the ghostly chatter of the dishes.

And years passed. Perhaps the war is long since over—there is no village outside at all—the streets are quiet under the grass. I have an idea this is the sort of thing one will do on the very last day of all—sit in an empty café and listen to a clock ticking until—.

Madame came through the kitchen door, nodded to me and took her seat behind the table, her plump hands folded on the red book. *Ping* went the door. A handful of soldiers came in, took off their coats and began to play cards, chaffing and poking fun at the pretty waiting-boy, who threw up his little round head, rubbed his thick fringe out of his eyes and cheeked them back in his broken voice. Sometimes his voice boomed up from his throat, deep and harsh, and then in the middle of a sentence it broke and scattered in a funny squeaking. He seemed to enjoy it himself. You would not have been surprised if he had walked into the kitchen on his hands and brought back your dinner turning a catherine-wheel.

Ping went the door again. Two more men came in. They sat at the table nearest Madame, and she leaned to them with a birdlike movement, her head on one side. Oh, they had a grievance! The Lieutenant was a fool—nosing about—springing out at them—and they'd only been sewing on buttons. Yes, that was all—sewing on buttons, and up comes this young spark. “Now then, what are you up to?” They mimicked the idiotic voice. Madame drew down her mouth, nodding sympathy. The waiting-boy served them with glasses. He took a bottle of some orange-coloured stuff and put it on the table-edge. A shout from the card-players made him turn sharply, and crash! over went the bottle, spilling on the table, the floor—smash! to tinkling atoms. An amazed silence. Through it the drip-drip of the wine from the table on to the floor. It looked very strange dropping so slowly, as though the table were crying. Then there came a roar from the card-players. “You'll catch it, my lad! That's the style! Now you've done it! ... Sept, huit, neuf.” They started playing again. The waiting-boy never said a word. He stood, his head bent, his hands spread out, and then he knelt and gathered up the glass, piece by piece, and soaked the wine up with a cloth. Only when Madame cried cheerfully, “You wait until *he* finds out,” did he raise his head.

“He can't say anything, if I pay for it,” he muttered, his face jerking, and he marched off into the kitchen with the soaking cloth.

“*Il pleure de colère,*” said Madame delightedly, patting her hair with her plump hands.

The café slowly filled. It grew very warm. Blue smoke mounted from the tables and hung about the haymaker's hat in misty wreaths. There was a suffocating smell of onion soup and boots and damp cloth. In the din the door sounded again. It opened to let in a weed of a fellow, who stood with his back against it, one hand shading his eyes.

“Hullo! you've got the bandage off?”

“How does it feel, *mon vieux?*”



“Let's have a look at them.”

But he made no reply. He shrugged and walked unsteadily to a table, sat down and leant against the wall. Slowly his hand fell. In his white face his eyes showed, pink as a rabbit's. They brimmed and spilled, brimmed and spilled. He dragged a white cloth out of his pocket and wiped them.

“It's the smoke,” said someone. “It's the smoke tickles them up for you.”

His comrades watched him a bit, watched his eyes fill again, again brim over. The water ran down his face, off his chin on to the table. He rubbed the place with his coat-sleeve, and then, as though forgetful, went on rubbing, rubbing with his hand across the table, staring in front of him. And then he started shaking his head to the movement of his hand. He gave a loud strange groan and dragged out the cloth again.

“*Huit, neuf, dix,*” said the card-players.

“*P'tit,* some more bread.”

“Two coffees.”

“*Un Picon!*”

The waiting-boy, quite recovered, but with scarlet cheeks, ran to and fro. A tremendous quarrel flared up among the card-players, raged for two minutes, and died in flickering laughter. “Ooof!” groaned the man with the eyes, rocking and mopping. But nobody paid any attention to him except Madame. She made a little grimace at her two soldiers.

“*Mais vous savez, c'est un peu dégoûtant, ça,*” she said severely.

“*Ah, oui, Madame,*” answered the soldiers, watching her bent head and pretty hands, as she arranged for the hundredth time a frill of lace on her lifted bosom.

“*Vlà monsieur!*” cawed the waiting-boy over his shoulder to me. For some silly reason I pretended not to hear, and I leaned over the table smelling the violets, until the little corporal's hand closed over mine.

“Shall we have *un peu de charcuterie* to begin with?” he asked tenderly.

* * *

“In England,” said the blue-eyed soldier, “you drink whiskey with your meals. *N'est-ce pas, mademoiselle?* A little glass of whiskey neat before eating. Whiskey and soda with your *bifteks*, and after, more whiskey with hot water and lemon.”

“Is it true, that?” asked his great friend who sat opposite, a big red-faced chap with a black beard and large moist eyes and hair that looked as though it had been cut with a sewingmachine.



“Well, not quite true,” said I.

“*Si, si,*” cried the blue-eyed soldier. “I ought to know. I’m in business. English travellers come to my place, and it’s always the same thing.”

“Bah, I can’t stand whiskey,” said the little corporal. “It’s too disgusting the morning after. Do you remember, *ma fille*, the whiskey in that little bar at Montmartre?”

“*Souvenir tendre,*” sighed Blackbeard, putting two fingers in the breast of his coat and letting his head fall. He was very drunk.

“But I know something that you’ve never tasted,” said the blue-eyed soldier pointing a finger at me; “something really good.” *Cluck* he went with his tongue. “*É-pa-tant!* And the curious thing is that you’d hardly know it from whiskey except that it’s”—he felt with his hand for the word—“finer, sweeter perhaps, not so sharp, and it leaves you feeling gay as a rabbit next morning.”

“What is it called?”

“Mirabelle!” He rolled the word round his mouth, under his tongue. “Ah-ha, that’s the stuff.”

“I could eat another mushroom,” said Blackbeard. “I would like another mushroom very much. I am sure I could eat another mushroom if Mademoiselle gave it to me out of her hand.”

“You ought to try it,” said the blue-eyed soldier, leaning both hands on the table and speaking so seriously that I began to wonder how much more sober he was than Blackbeard. “You ought to try it, and to-night. I would like you to tell me if you don’t think it’s like whiskey.”

“Perhaps they’ve got it here,” said the little corporal, and he called the waiting-boy. “*P’tit!*”

“*Non, monsieur,*” said the boy, who never stopped smiling. He served us with dessert plates painted with blue parrots and horned beetles.

“What is the name for this in English?” said Blackbeard, pointing. I told him “Parrot.”

“Ah, *mon Dieu!* ... *Pair-rot...*” He put his arms round his plate. “I love you, *ma petite* pair-rot. You are sweet, you are blonde, you are English. You do not know the difference between whiskey and mirabelle.”

The little corporal and I looked at each other, laughing. He squeezed up his eyes when he laughed, so that you saw nothing but the long curly lashes.



“Well, I know a place where they do keep it,” said the blue-eyed soldier. “*Café des Amis*. We'll go there—I'll pay—I'll pay for the whole lot of us.” His gesture embraced thousands of pounds.

But with a loud whirring noise the clock on the wall struck half-past eight; and no soldier is allowed in a café after eight o'clock at night.

“It is fast,” said the blue-eyed soldier. The little corporal's watch said the same. So did the immense turnip that Blackbeard produced, and carefully deposited on the head of one of the horned beetles.

“Ah, well, we'll take the risk,” said the blue-eyed soldier, and he thrust his arms into his immense cardboard coat. “It's worth it,” he said. “It's worth it. You just wait.”

Outside, stars shone between wispy clouds, and the moon fluttered like a candle flame over a pointed spire. The shadows of the dark plume-like trees waved on the white houses. Not a soul to be seen. No sound to be heard but the *Hsh! Hsh!* of a far-away train, like a big beast shuffling in its sleep.

“You are cold,” whispered the little corporal. “You are cold, *ma fille*.”

“No, really not.”

“But you are trembling.”

“Yes, but I'm not cold.”

“What are the women like in England?” asked Blackbeard. “After the war is over I shall go to England. I shall find a little English woman and marry her—and her pair-rot.” He gave a loud choking laugh.

“Fool!” said the blue-eyed soldier, shaking him; and he leant over to me. “It is only after the second glass that you really taste it,” he whispered. “The second little glass and then—ah!—then you know.”

Café des Amis gleamed in the moonlight. We glanced quickly up and down the road. We ran up the four wooden steps, and opened the ringing glass door into a low room lighted with a hanging lamp, where about ten people were dining. They were seated on two benches at a narrow table.

“Soldiers!” screamed a woman, leaping up from behind a white soup-tureen—a scrag of a woman in a black shawl. “Soldiers! At this hour! Look at that clock, look at it.” And she pointed to the clock with the dripping ladle.

“It's fast,” said the blue-eyed soldier. It's fast, madame. And don't make so much noise, I beg of you. We will drink and we will go.”



“Will you?” she cried, running round the table and planting herself in front of us. “That's just what you won't do. Coming into an honest woman's house this hour of the night—making a scene—getting the police after you. Ah, no! Ah, no! It's a disgrace, that's what it is.”

“Sh!” said the little corporal, holding up his hand. Dead silence. In the silence we heard steps passing.

“The police,” whispered Blackbeard, winking at a pretty girl with rings in her ears, who smiled back at him, saucy. “Sh!”

The faces lifted, listening. “How beautiful they are!” I thought. “They are like a family party having supper in the New Testament. . . .” The steps died away.

“Serve you very well right if you had been caught,” scolded the angry woman. “I'm sorry on your account that the police didn't come. You deserve it—you deserve it.”

“A little glass of mirabelle and we will go,” persisted the blue-eyed soldier.

Still scolding and muttering she took four glasses from the cupboard and a big bottle.

“But you're not going to drink in here. Don't you believe it.” The little corporal ran into the kitchen. “Not there! Not there! Idiot!” she cried. “Can't you see there's a window there, and a wall opposite where the police come every evening to. . . .”

“Sh!” Another scare.

“You are mad and you will end in prison,—all four of you,” said the woman. She flounced out of the room. We tiptoed after her into a dark smelling scullery, full of pans of greasy water, of salad leaves and meat-bones.

“There now,” she said, putting down the glasses. “Drink and go!”

“Ah, at last!” The blue-eyed soldier's happy voice trickled through the dark. “What do you think? Isn't it just as I said? Hasn't it got a taste of excellent—*ex-cellent* whiskey?”

