



AT 'LEHMANN'S' (1910)

By Katherine Mansfield

Certainly Sabina did not find life slow. She was on the trot from early morning until late at night. At five o'clock she tumbled out of bed, buttoned on her clothes, wearing a long-sleeved alpaca pinafore over her black frock, and groped her way downstairs into the kitchen.

Anna, the cook, had grown so fat during the summer that she adored her bed because she did not have to wear her corsets there, but could spread as much as she liked, roll about under the great mattress, calling upon Jesus and Holy Mary and Blessed Anthony himself that her life was not fit for a pig in a cellar.

Sabina was new to her work. Pink colour still flew in her cheeks; there was a little dimple on the left side of her mouth that even when she was most serious, most absorbed, popped out and gave her away. And Anna blessed that dimple. It meant an extra half-hour in bed for her; it made Sabina light the fire, turn out the kitchen and wash endless cups and saucers that had been left over from the evening before. Hans, the scullery boy, did not come until seven. He was the son of the butcher – a mean, undersized child very much like one of his father's sausages, Sabina thought. His red face was covered with pimples, and his nails indescribably filthy. When Herr Lehmann himself told Hans to get a hairpin and clean them he said they were stained from birth because his mother had always got so inky doing the accounts – and Sabina believed him and pitied him.

Winter had come very early to Mindelbau. By the end of October the streets were banked waist-high with snow, and the greater number of the "Cure Guests," sick unto death of cold water and herbs, had departed in nothing approaching peace. So the large salon was shut at Lehmann's and the breakfast-room was all the accommodation the cafe afforded. Here the floor had to be washed over, the tables rubbed, coffee-cups set out, each with its little china platter of sugar, and newspapers and magazines hung on their hooks along the walls before Herr Lehmann appeared at seven-thirty and opened business.

As a rule his wife served in the shop leading into the cafe, but she had chosen the quiet season to have a baby, and, a big woman at the best of times, she had grown so enormous in the process that her husband told her she looked unappetising, and had better remain upstairs and sew.

Sabina took on the extra work without any thought of extra pay. She loved to stand behind the counter, cutting up slices of Anna's marvellous chocolate-spotted confections, or doing up packets of sugar almonds in pink and blue striped bags.



"You'll get varicose veins, like me," said Anna. "That's what the Frau's got, too. No wonder the baby doesn't come! All her swelling's got into her legs." And Hans was immensely interested.

During the morning business was comparatively slack. Sabina answered the shop bell, attended to a few customers who drank a liqueur to warm their stomachs before the midday meal, and ran upstairs now and again to ask the Frau if she wanted anything. But in the afternoon six or seven choice spirits played cards, and everybody who was anybody drank tea or coffee.

"Sabina . . . Sabina . . . "

She flew from one table to the other, counting out handfuls of small change, giving orders to Anna through the "slide," helping the men with their heavy coats, always with that magical child air about her, that delightful sense of perpetually attending a party.

"How is the Frau Lehmann?" the women would whisper.

"She feels rather low, but as well as can be expected," Sabina would answer, nodding confidentially.

Frau Lehmann's bad time was approaching. Anna and her friends referred to it as her "journey to Rome," and Sabina longed to ask questions, yet, being ashamed of her ignorance, was silent, trying to puzzle it out for herself. She knew practically nothing except that the Frau had a baby inside her, which had to come out – very painful indeed. One could not have one without a husband – that she also realised. But what had the man got to do with it? So she wondered as she sat mending tea towels in the evening, head bent over her work, light shining on her brown curls. Birth – what was it? wondered Sabina. Death – such a simple thing. She had a little picture of her dead grandmother dressed in a black silk frock, tired hands clasping the crucifix that dragged between her flattened breasts, mouth curiously tight, yet almost secretly smiling. But the grandmother had been born once – that was the important fact.

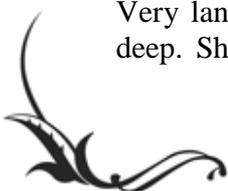
As she sat there one evening, thinking, the Young Man entered the cafe, and called for a glass of port wine. Sabina rose slowly. The long day and the hot room made her feel a little languid, but as she poured out the wine she felt the Young Man's eyes fixed on her, looked down at him and dimpled.

"It's cold out," she said, corking the bottle.

The Young Man ran his hands through his snow-powdered hair and laughed.

"I wouldn't call it exactly tropical," he said, "But you're very snug in here – look as though you've been asleep."

Very languid felt Sabina in the hot room, and the Young Man's voice was strong and deep. She thought she had never seen anybody who looked so strong – as though he



could take up the table in one hand – and his restless gaze wandering over her face and figure gave her a curious thrill deep in her body, half pleasure, half pain... She wanted to stand there, close beside him, while he drank his wine. A little silence followed. Then he took a book out of his pocket, and Sabina went back to her sewing. Sitting there in the corner, she listened to the sound of the leaves being turned and the loud ticking of the clock that hung over the gilt mirror. She wanted to look at him again – there was a something about him, in his deep voice, even in the way his clothes fitted. From the room above she heard the heavy dragging sound of Frau Lehmann's footsteps, and again the old thoughts worried Sabina. If she herself should one day look like that – feel like that! Yet it would be very sweet to have a little baby to dress and jump up and down.

"Fräulein – what's your name – what are you smiling at?" called the Young Man.

She blushed and looked up, hands quiet in her lap, looked across the empty tables and shook her head.

"Come here, and I'll show you a picture," he commanded.

She went and stood beside him. He opened the book, and Sabina saw a coloured sketch of a naked girl sitting on the edge of a great, crumpled bed, a man's opera hat on the back of her head.

He put his hand over the body, leaving only the face exposed, then scrutinised Sabina closely.

"Well?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, knowing perfectly well.

"Why, it might be your own photograph – the face, I mean – that's as far as I can judge."

"But the hair's done differently," said Sabina, laughing. She threw back her head, and the laughter bubbled in her round white throat.

"It's rather a nice picture, don't you think?" he asked. But she was looking at a curious ring he wore on the hand that covered the girl's body, and only nodded.

"Ever seen anything like it before?"

"Oh, there's plenty of those funny ones in the illustrated papers."

"How would you like to have your picture taken that way?"

"Me? I'd never let anybody see it. Besides, I haven't got a hat like that!"

"That's easily remedied."



Again a little silence, broken by Anna throwing up the slide.

Sabina ran into the kitchen.

"Here, take this milk and egg up to the Frau," said Anna. "Who've you got in there?"

"Got such a funny man! I think he's a little gone here," tapping her forehead.

Upstairs in the ugly room the Frau sat sewing, a black shawl round her shoulders, her feet encased in red woollen slippers. The girl put the milk on a table by her, then stood, polishing a spoon on her apron.

"Nothing else?"

"Na," said the Frau, heaving up in her chair. "Where's my man?"

"He's playing cards over at Snipold's. Do you want him?"

"Dear heaven, leave him alone. I'm nothing. I don't matter... And the whole day waiting here."

Her hand shook as she wiped the rim of the glass with her fat finger.

"Shall I help you to bed?"

"You go downstairs, leave me alone. Tell Anna not to let Hans grub the sugar – give him one on the ear."

"Ugly – ugly – ugly," muttered Sabina, returning to the cafe where the Young Man stood coat-buttoned, ready for departure.

"I'll come again to-morrow," said he. "Don't twist your hair back so tightly; it will lose all its curl."

"Well, you are a funny one," she said. "Good night."

By the time Sabina was ready for bed Anna was snoring. She brushed out her long hair and gathered it in her hands... Perhaps it would be a pity if it lost all its curl. Then she looked down at her straight chemise, and drawing it off, sat down on the side of the bed.

"I wish," she whispered, smiling sleepily, "there was a great big looking-glass in this room."

Lying down in the darkness, she hugged her little body.

"I wouldn't be the Frau for one hundred marks – not for a thousand marks. To look like that."



And half-dreaming, she imagined herself heaving up in her chair with the port wine bottle in her hand as the Young Man entered the cafe.

Cold and dark the next morning. Sabina woke, tired, feeling as though something heavy had been pressing under her heart all night. There was a sound of footsteps shuffling along the passage. Herr Lehmann! She must have overslept herself. Yes, he was rattling the door-handle.

"One moment, one moment," she called, dragging on her stockings.

"Bina, tell Anna to go to the Frau – but quickly. I must ride for the nurse."

"Yes, yes!" she cried. "Has it come?"

But he had gone, and she ran over to Anna and shook her by the shoulder.

"The Frau – the baby – Herr Lehmann for the nurse," she stuttered.

"Name of God!" said Anna, flinging herself out of bed.

No complaints to-day. Importance – enthusiasm in Anna's whole bearing.

"You run downstairs and light the oven. Put on a pan of water" – speaking to an imaginary sufferer as she fastened her blouse – "Yes, yes, I know – we must be worse before we are better – I'm coming – patience."

It was dark all that day. Lights were turned on immediately the cafe opened, and business was very brisk. Anna, turned out of the Frau's room by the nurse, refused to work, and sat in a corner nursing herself, listening to sounds overhead. Hans was more sympathetic than Sabina. He also forsook work, and stood by the window, picking his nose.

"But why must I do everything?" said Sabina, washing glasses. "I can't help the Frau; she oughtn't to take such a time about it."

"Listen," said Anna, "they've moved her into the back bedroom above here, so as not to disturb the people. That was a groan – that one!"

"Two small beers," shouted Herr Lehmann through the slide.

"One moment, one moment."

At eight o'clock the cafe was deserted. Sabina sat down in the corner without her sewing. Nothing seemed to have happened to the Frau. A doctor had come – that was all.

"Ach," said Sabina. "I think no more of it. I listen no more. Ach, I would like to go away – I hate this talk. I will not hear it. No, it is too much." She leaned both elbows on the table – cupped her face in her hands and pouted.



But the outer door suddenly opening, she sprang to her feet and laughed. It was the Young Man again. He ordered more port, and brought no book this time.

"Don't go and sit miles away," he grumbled. "I want to be amused. And here, take my coat. Can't you dry it somewhere? – snowing again."

"There's a warm place – the ladies' cloak-room," she said. "I'll take it in there – just by the kitchen."

She felt better, and quite happy again.

"I'll come with you," he said. "I'll see where you put it."

And that did not seem at all extraordinary. She laughed and beckoned to him.

"In here," she cried. "Feel how warm. I'll put more wood on that oven. It doesn't matter, they're all busy upstairs."

She knelt down on the floor, and thrust the wood into the oven, laughing at her own wicked extravagance.

The Frau was forgotten, the stupid day was forgotten. Here was someone beside her laughing, too. They were together in the little warm room stealing Herr Lehmann's wood. It seemed the most exciting adventure in the world. She wanted to go on laughing – or burst out crying – or – or – catch hold of the Young Man.

"What a fire," she shrieked, stretching out her hands.

"Here's a hand; pull up," said the Young Man. "There, now, you'll catch it to-morrow."

They stood opposite to each other, hands still clinging. And again that strange tremor thrilled Sabina.

"Look here," he said roughly, "are you a child, or are you playing at being one?"

"I – I – "

Laughter ceased. She looked up at him once, then down at the floor, and began breathing like a frightened little animal.

He pulled her closer still and kissed her mouth.

"Na, what are you doing?" she whispered.

He let go her hands, he placed his on her breasts, and the room seemed to swim round Sabina. Suddenly, from the room above, a frightful, tearing shriek.

She wrenched herself away, tightened herself, drew herself up.



"Who did that – who made that noise?"

* * *

In the silence the thin wailing of a baby.

"Achh!" shrieked Sabina, rushing from the room.

