



## BEING A TRUTHFUL ADVENTURE (1911)

By Katherine Mansfield

“The little town lies spread before the gaze of the eager traveller like a faded tapestry threaded with the silver of its canals, made musical by the great chiming belfry. Life is long since asleep in Bruges; fantastic dreams alone breathe over tower and mediaeval house front, enchanting the eye, inspiring the soul and filling the mind with the great beauty of contemplation.”

I read this sentence from a guide-book while waiting for Madame in the hotel sitting-room. It sounded extremely comforting, and my tired heart, tucked away under a thousand and one grey city wrappings, woke and exulted within me... I wondered if I had enough clothes with me to last for at least a month. “I shall dream away whole days,” I thought, “take a boat and float up and down the canals, or tether it to a green bush tangling the water side, and absorb mediaeval house fronts. At evensong I shall lie in the long grass of the Béguinage meadow and look up at the elm trees—their leaves touched with gold light and quivering in the blue air—listening the while to the voices of nuns at prayer in the little chapel, and growing full enough of grace to last me the whole winter.”

While I soared magnificently upon these very new feathers Madame came in and told me that there was no room at all for me in the hotel—not a bed, not a corner. She was extremely friendly and seemed to find a fund of secret amusement in the fact; she looked at me as though expecting me to break into delighted laughter. “To-morrow,” she said, “there may be. I am expecting a young gentleman who is suddenly taken ill to move from number eleven. He is at present at the chemist’s—perhaps you would care to see the room?”

“Not at all,” said I. “Neither shall I wish to-morrow to sleep in the bedroom of an indisposed young gentleman.”

“But he will be gone,” cried Madame, opening her blue eyes wide and laughing with that French cordiality so enchanting to English hearing. I was too tired and hungry to feel either appreciative or argumentative. “Perhaps you can recommend me another hotel?”

“Impossible!” She shook her head and turned up her eyes, mentally counting over the blue bows painted on the ceiling. “You see, it is the season in Bruges, and people do not care to let their rooms for a very short time”—not a glance at my little suit case lying between us, but I looked at it gloomily, and it seemed to dwindle before my desperate gaze—become small enough to hold nothing but a collapsible folding tooth-brush.

“My large box is at the station,” I said coldly, buttoning my gloves.



Madame started. "You have more luggage. ... Then you intend to make a long stay in Bruges, perhaps?"

"At least a fortnight—perhaps a month." I shrugged my shoulders.

"One moment," said Madame. "I shall see what I can do." She disappeared, I am sure not further than the other side of the door, for she reappeared immediately and told me I might have a room at her private house—"just round the corner and kept by an old servant who, although she has a wall eye, has been in our family for fifteen years. The porter will take you there, and you can have supper before you go."

I was the only guest in the dining-room. A tired waiter provided me with an omelette and a pot of coffee, then leaned against a sideboard and watched me while I ate, the limp table napkin over his arm seeming to symbolise the very man. The room was hung with mirrors reflecting unlimited empty tables and watchful waiters and solitary ladies finding sad comfort in omelettes, and sipping coffee to the rhythm of Mendelssohn's Spring Song played over three times by the great chiming belfry.

"Are you ready, Madame?" asked the waiter. "It is I who carry your luggage."

"Quite ready."

He heaved the suit case on to his shoulder and strode before me—past the little pavement cafés where men and women, scenting our approach, laid down their beer and their post-cards to stare after us, down a narrow street of shuttered houses, through the Place van Eyck, to a red-brick house. The door was opened by the wall-eyed family treasure, who held a candle like a miniature frying-pan in her hand. She refused to admit us until we had both told the whole story.

"C'est ça, c'est ça," said she. "Jean, number five!"

She shuffled up the stairs, unlocked a door and lit another miniature frying-pan upon the bed-table. The room was papered in pink, having a pink bed, a pink door and a pink chair. On pink mats on the mantelpiece obese young cherubs burst out of pink eggshells with trumpets in their mouths. I was brought a can of hot water; I shut and locked the door. "Bruges at last," I thought as I climbed into a bed so slippery with fine linen that one felt like a fish endeavouring to swim over an ice pond, and this quiet house with the old "typical" servant,—the Place van Eyck, with the white statue surrounded by those dark and heavy trees,—there was almost a touch of Verlaine in that. ...

Bang! went a door. I started up in terror and felt for the frying-pan, but it was the room next to mine suddenly invaded. "Ah! home at last," cried a female voice. "Mon Dieu, my feet! Would you go down to Marie, mon cher, and ask her for the tin bath and some hot water?"

"No, that is too much," boomed the answer. "You have washed them three times to-day already."



“But you do not know the pain I suffer; they are quite inflamed. Look only!”

“I have looked three times already; I am tired. I beg of you come to bed.”

“It would be useless; I could not sleep. Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, how a woman suffers!” A masculine snort accompanied by the sounds of undressing.

“Then, if I wait until the morning will you promise not to drag me to a picture gallery?”

“Yes, yes, I promise.”

“But truly?”

“I have said so.”

“Now can I believe you?”

A long groan.

“It is absurd to make that noise, for you know yourself the same thing happened last evening and this morning.”

... There was only one thing to be done. I coughed and cleared my throat in that unpleasant and obtrusive way of strange people in next door bedrooms. It acted like a charm, their conversation sifted into a whisper for female voice only! I fell asleep.

“Barquettes for hire. Visit the Venice of the North by boat. Explore the little known and fascinating by-ways.” With the memory of the guide book clinging about me I went into the shop and demanded a boat. “Have you a small canoe?”

“No, Mademoiselle, but a little boat—very suitable.”

“I wish to go alone and return when I like.”

“Then you have been here before?”

“No.”

The boatman looked puzzled. “It is not safe for Mademoiselle to go without a guide for the first time.”

“Then I will take one on the condition that he is silent and points out no beauties to me.”

“But the names of the bridges? “cried the boatman—“the famous house fronts?”



I ran down to the landing stage. “Pierre, Pierre!” called the waterman. A burly young Belgian, his arms full of carpet strips and red velvet pillows, appeared and tossed his spoil into an immense craft. On the bridge above the landing stage a crowd collected, watching the proceedings, and just as I took my seat a fat couple who had been hanging over the parapet rushed down the steps and declared they must come too. “Certainly, certainly,” said Pierre, handing in the lady with charming grace. “Mademoiselle will not mind at all.” They sat in the stern, the gentleman held the lady's hand, and we twisted among these “silver ribbons” while Pierre threw out his chest and chanted the beauties of Bruges with the exultant abandon of a Latin lover. “Turn your head this way—to the left—to the right—now, wait one moment—look up at the bridge—observe this house front. Mademoiselle do you wish to see the Lac d'Amour?”

I looked vague; the fat couple answered for me.

“Then we shall disembark.”

We rowed close into a little parapet. We caught hold of a bush and I jumped out. “Now, Monsieur,” who successfully followed, and, kneeling on the bank, gave Madame the crook of his walking-stick for support. She stood up, smiling and vigorous, clutched the walking-stick, strained against the boat side, and the next moment had fallen flat into the water. “Ah! what has happened—what has happened!” screamed Monsieur, clutching her arm, for the water was not deep, reaching only to her waist mark. Somehow or other we fished her up on to the bank where she sat and gasped, wringing her black alpaca skirt.

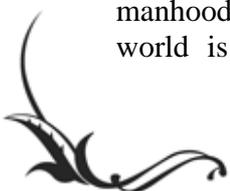
“It is all over—a little accident!” said she, amazingly cheerful.

But Pierre was furious. “It is the fault of Mademoiselle for wishing to see the Lac d'Amour,” said he. “Madame had better walk through the meadow and drink something hot at the little café opposite.”

“No, no,” said she, but Monsieur seconded Pierre.

“You will await our return,” said Pierre, loathing me. I nodded and turned my back, for the sight of Madame flopping about on the meadow grass like a large, ungainly duck, was too much. One cannot expect to travel in upholstered boats with people who are enlightened enough to understand laughter that has its wellspring in sympathy. When they were out of sight I ran as fast as I could over the meadow, crawled through a fence, and never went near the Lac d'Amour again. “They may think me as drowned as they please,” thought I, “I have had quite enough of canals to last me a lifetime.”

In the Béguinage meadow at evensong little groups of painters are dotted about in the grass with spindle-legged easels which seem to possess a separate individuality, and stand rudely defying their efforts and returning their long, long gaze with an unfinished stare. English girls wearing flower-wreathed hats and the promise of young American manhood, give expression to their souls with a gaiety and “camaraderie,” a sort of “the world is our shining playground” spirit—theoretically delightful. They call to one



another, and throw cigarettes and fruit and chocolates with youthful naïveté, while parties of tourists who have escaped the clutches of an old woman lying in wait for them in the shadow of the chapel door, pause thoughtfully in front of the easels to “see and remark, and say whose?”

I was lying under a tree with the guilty consciousness of no sketch book—watching the swifts wheel and dip in the bright air, and wondering if all the brown dogs resting in the grass belonged to the young painters, when two people passed me, a man and a girl, their heads bent over a book. There was something vaguely familiar in their walk. Suddenly they looked down at me—we stared—opened our mouths. She swooped down upon me, and he took off his immaculate straw hat and placed it under his left arm.

“Katherine! How extraordinary! How incredible after all these years!” cried she. Turning to the man: “Guy, can you believe it?—It’s Katherine, in Bruges of all places in the world!”

“Why not?” said I, looking very bright and trying to remember her name.

“But, my dear, the last time we met was in New Zealand—only think of the miles!”

Of course, she was Betty Sinclair; I’d been to school with her.

“Where are you staying; have you been here long? Oh, you haven’t changed a day—not a day. I’d have known you anywhere.”

She beckoned to the young man, and said, blushing as though she were ashamed of the fact, but it had to be faced, “This is my husband.” We shook hands. He sat down and chewed a grass twig. Silence fell while Betty recovered breath and squeezed my hand.

“I didn’t know you were married,” I said stupidly.

“Oh, my dear—got a baby!” said Betty. “We live in England now. We’re frightfully keen on the Suffrage, you know.”

Guy removed the straw. “Are you with us?” he asked, intensely.

I shook my head. He put the straw back again and narrowed his eyes.

“Then here’s the opportunity,” said Betty. “My dear, how long are you going to stay? We must go about together and have long talks. Guy and I aren’t a honeymoon couple, you know. We love to have other people with us sometimes.”

The belfry clashed into *See the Conquering Hero Comes!*

“Unfortunately I have to go home quite soon. I’ve had an urgent letter.”



“How disappointing! You know Bruges is simply packed with treasures and churches and pictures. There's an out-door concert tonight in the Grand' Place, and a competition of bell ringers to-morrow to go on for a whole week.”

“Go I must,” I said so firmly that my soul felt imperative marching orders, stimulated by the belfry.

“But the quaint streets and the Continental smells, and the lace makers—if we could just wander about—we three—and absorb it all.” I sighed and bit my underlip.

“What's your objection to the vote?” asked Guy, watching the nuns wending their way in sweet procession among the trees.

“I always had the idea you were so frightfully keen on the future of women,” said Betty. “Come to dinner with us to-night. Let's thrash the whole subject out. You know, after the strenuous life in London, one does seem to see things in such a different light in this old world city.”

“Oh, a very different light indeed,” I answered, shaking my head at the familiar guide book emerging from Guy's pocket.

