

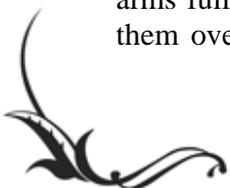


## EPILOGUE II: VIOLET (1913)

By Katherine Mansfield

*"I met a young virgin  
Who sadly did moan ..."*

There is a very unctuous and irritating English proverb to the effect that "Every cloud has a silver lining." What comfort can it be to one steeped to the eyebrows in clouds to ponder over their linings, and what an unpleasant picture-postcard seal it sets upon one's tragedy—turning it into a little ha'penny monstrosity with a moon in the left-hand corner like a vainglorious threepenny bit! Nevertheless, like most unctuous and irritating things, it is true. The lining woke me after my first night at the Pension Seguin and showed me over the feather bolster a room bright with sunlight as if every golden-haired baby in Heaven were pelting the earth with buttercup posies. "What a charming fancy!" I thought. "How much prettier than the proverb! It sounds like a day in the country with Katharine Tynan." And I saw a little picture of myself and Katharine Tynan being handed glasses of milk by a red-faced woman with an immensely fat apron, while we discussed the direct truth of proverbs as opposed to the fallacy of playful babies. But in such a case imaginary I was ranged on the side of the proverbs. "There's a lot of sound sense in 'em," said that coarse being. "I admire the way they put their collective foot down upon the female attempt to embroider everything. 'The pitcher that goes too often to the well gets broken.' *Also gut.* Not even a loophole for a set of verses to a broken pitcher. No possible chance of the well being one of those symbolic founts to which all hearts in the form of pitchers are carried. The only proverb I disapprove of," went on this impossible creature, pulling a spring onion from the garden bed and chewing on it, "is the one about a bird in the hand. I naturally prefer birds in bushes." "But," said Katharine Tynan, tender and brooding, as she lifted a little green fly from her milk glass, "but if you were Saint Francis, the bird would not *mind* being in your hand. It would *prefer* the white nest of your fingers to any bush." I jumped out of bed and ran over to the window and opened it wide and leaned out. Down below in the avenue a wind shook and swung the trees; the scent of leaves was on the lifting air. The houses lining the avenue were small and white. Charming, chaste-looking little houses, showing glimpses of lace and knots of ribbon, for all the world like country children in a row, about to play 'Nuts and May.' I began to imagine an adorable little creature named Yvette who lived in one and all of these houses. ... She spends her morning in a white lace boudoir cap, worked with daisies, sipping chocolate from a Sèvres cup with one hand, while a faithful attendant polishes the little pink nails of the other. She spends the afternoon in her tiny white and gold boudoir, curled up, a Persian kitten on her lap, while her ardent, beautiful lover leans over the back of the sofa, kissing and kissing again that thrice fascinating dimple on her left shoulder. ... When one of the balcony windows opened, and a stout servant swaggered out with her arms full of rugs and carpet strips. With a gesture expressing fury and disgust she flung them over the railing, disappeared, re-appeared again with a long-handled cane broom



and fell upon the wretched rugs and carpets. Bang! Whack! Whack! Bang! Their feeble, pitiful jiggling inflamed her to ever greater effort. Clouds of dust flew up round her, and when one little rug escaped and flopped down to the avenue below, like a fish, she leaned over the balcony, shaking her fist and the broom at it.

Lured by the noise, an old gentleman came to a window opposite and cast an eye of approval upon the industrious girl and yawned in the face of the lovely day. There was an air of detachment and deliberation about the way he carefully felt over the muscles of his arms and legs, pressed his throat, coughed, and shot a jet of spittle out of the window. Nobody seemed more surprised at this last feat than he. He seemed to regard it as a small triumph in its way, buttoning his immense stomach into a white piqué waistcoat with every appearance of satisfaction. Away flew my charming Yvette in a black and white check dress, an alpaca apron, and a market basket over her arm.

I dressed, ate a roll and drank some tepid coffee, feeling very sobered. I thought how true it was that the world was a delightful place if it were not for the people, and how more than true it was that people were not worth troubling about, and that wise men should set their affections upon nothing smaller than cities, heavenly or otherwise, and countrysides, which are always heavenly. With these reflections, both pious and smug, I put on my hat, groped my way along the dark passage, and ran down the five flights of stairs into the Rue St. Léger. There was a garden on the opposite side of the street, through which one walked to the University and the more pretentious avenues fronting the Place du Théâtre. Although autumn was well advanced, not a leaf had fallen from the trees, the little shrubs and bushes were touched with pink and crimson, and against the blue sky the trees stood sheathed in gold. On stone benches nursemaids in white cloaks and stiff white caps chattered and wagged their heads like a company of cockatoos, and, up and down, in the sun, some genteel babies bowled hoops with a delicate air. What peculiar pleasure it is to wander through a strange city and amuse oneself as a child does, playing a solitary game!

“Pardon, Madame, mais voulez-vous ...” and then the voice faltered and cried my name as though I had been given up for lost times without number; as though I had been drowned in foreign seas, and burnt in American hotel fires, and buried in a hundred lonely graves. “What on *earth* are you doing here?” Before me, not a day changed, not a hairpin altered, stood Violet Burton. I was flattered beyond measure at this enthusiasm, and pressed her cold, strong hand, and said “Extraordinary!”

“But what are you *here* for?”

“... Nerves.”

“Oh, impossible, I really can't believe that.”

“It is perfectly true,” I said, my enthusiasm waning. There is nothing more annoying to a woman than to be suspected of nerves of iron.

“Well, you certainly don't *look* it,” said she, scrutinising me, with that direct English frankness that makes one feel as though sitting in the glare of a window at breakfast-time.



“What are *you* here for?” I said, smiling graciously to soften the glare. At that she turned and looked across the lawns, and fidgetted with her umbrella like a provincial actress about to make a confession. “I”—in a quiet affected voice—“I came here to forget. ... But,” facing me again, and smiling energetically, “don't let's talk about that. Not yet. I can't explain. Not until I know you all over again.” Very solemnly—“Not until I am sure you are to be trusted.”

“Oh, don't trust me, Violet!” I cried. “I'm not to be trusted. I wouldn't if I were you.” She frowned and stared.

“What a terrible thing to say. You can't be in earnest.”

“Yes, I am. There's nothing I adore talking about so much as another person's secret.” To my surprise, she came to my side and put her arm through mine.

“Thank you,” she said, gratefully. “I think it's awfully good of you to take me into your confidence like that. Awfully. And even if it were true ... but no, it can't be true, otherwise you wouldn't have told me. I mean it can't be psychologically true of the same nature to be frank and dishonourable at the same time. Can it? But then ... I don't know. I suppose it is possible. Don't you find that the Russian novelists have made an upheaval of all your conclusions?” We walked, *bras dessus bras dessous*, down the sunny path.

“Let's sit down,” said Violet. “There's a fountain quite near this bench. I often come here. You can hear it all the time.” The faint noise of the water sounded like a half-forgotten tune, half sly, half laughing.

“Isn't it wonderful!” breathed Violet. “Like weeping in the night.”

“Oh, Violet,” said I, terrified at this turn. “Wonderful things don't weep in the night. They sleep like tops and know nothing more till again it is day.”

She put her arm over the back of the bench and crossed her legs.

“Why do you persist in denying your emotions? Why are you ashamed of them?” she demanded.

“I'm not. But I keep them tucked away, and only produce them very occasionally, like special little pots of jam, when the people whom I love come to tea.”

“There you are again! Emotions and jam! Now, I'm absolutely different. I live on mine. Sometimes I wish I didn't—but then again I would rather suffer through them—suffer intensely, I mean; go down into the depths with them, for the sake of that wonderful upward swing on to the pinnacles of happiness.” She edged nearer to me.

“I wish I could think where I get my nature from,” she went on. “Father and mother are absolutely different. I mean—they're quite normal—quite commonplace.” I shook my head and raised my eyebrows. “But it is no use fighting it. It has beaten me. Absolutely—



once and for all.” A pause, inadequately filled by the sly, laughing water. “Now,” said Violet, impressively, “you know what I meant when I said I came here to forget.”

“But I assure you I don't, Violet. How can you expect me to be so subtle? I quite understand that you don't wish to tell me until you know me better. Quite!”

She opened her eyes and her mouth.

“I *have* told you! I mean—not straight out. Not in so many words. But then—how could I? But when I told you of my emotional nature, and that I had been in the depths and swept up to the pinnacles ... surely, surely you realised that I was telling you, symbolically. What else can you have thought?”

No young girl ever performs such gymnastic feats by herself. Yet in my experience I had always imagined that the depths followed the pinnacles. I ventured to suggest so.

“They do,” said Violet, gloomily. “You see them, if you look, before and after.”

“Like the people in Shelley's *Skylark*,” said I.

Violet looked vague, and I repented. But I did not know how to sympathise, and I had no idea of the relative sizes.

“It was in the summer,” said Violet. “I had been most frightfully depressed. I don't know what it was. For one thing I felt as though I could not make up my mind to anything. I felt so terribly useless—that I had no place in the scheme of things—and worst of all, nobody who understood me. ... It may have been what I was reading at the time ... but I don't think ... not entirely. Still one never knows. Does one? And then I met ... Mr. Farr, at a dance—”

“Oh, call him by his Christian name, Violet. You can't go on telling me about Mr. Farr and you ... on the heights.”

“Why on earth not? Very well—I met—Arthur. I think I must have been mad that evening. For one thing there had been a bother about going. Mother didn't want me to, because she said there wouldn't be anybody to see me home. And I was frightfully keen. I must have had a presentiment, I think. Do you believe in presentiments? ... I don't know, we can't be certain, can we? Anyhow, I went. And *he* was there.” She turned a deep scarlet and bit her lip. Oh, I really began to like Violet Burton—to like her very much indeed.

“Go on,” I said.

“We danced together seven times and we talked the whole time. The music was very slow,—we talked of everything. You know ... about books and theatres and all that sort of thing at first, and then—about our souls.”

“... What?”



“I said—our souls. He understood me *absolutely*. And after the seventh dance ... No, I must tell you the first thing he ever said to me. He said, ‘Do you believe in Pan?’ Quite quietly. Just like that. And then he said, ‘I knew you did.’ Wasn't that extra-or-din-ary! After the seventh dance we sat out on the landing. And ... shall I go on?”

“Yes, go on.”

“He said, ‘I think I must be mad. I want to kiss you,’—and—I let him.”

“Do go on.”

“I simply can't tell you what I felt like. Fancy! I'd never kissed out of the family before. I mean—of course—never a man. And then he said: ‘I must tell you—I am engaged.’”

“Well?”

“What else is there? Of course I simply rushed upstairs and tumbled everything over in the dressing-room and found my coat and went home. And next morning I made Mother let me come here. I thought,” said Violet, “I thought I would have died of shame.”

“Is that all?” I cried. “You can't mean to say that's all?”

“What else could there be? What on earth did you expect. How extraordinary you are—staring at me like that!”

And in the long pause I heard again the little fountain, half sly, half laughing—at me, I thought, not at Violet.

