



FRAU BRECHENMACHER ATTENDS A WEDDING (1910)

By Katherine Mansfield

Getting ready was a terrible business. After supper Frau Brechenmacher packed four of the five babies to bed, allowing Rosa to stay with her and help to polish the buttons of Herr Brechenmacher's uniform. Then she ran over his best shirt with a hot iron, polished his boots, and put a stitch or two into his black satin necktie.

"Rosa," she said, "fetch my dress and hang it in front of the stove to get the creases out. Now, mind, you must look after the children and not sit up later than half-past eight, and not touch the lamp – you know what will happen if you do."

"Yes, mamma," said Rosa, who was nine and felt old enough to manage a thousand lamps. "But let me stay up – the 'Bub' may wake and want some milk."

"Half-past eight!" said the Frau. "I'll make the father tell you too."

Rosa drew down the corners of her mouth.

"But. . . but . . ."

"Here comes the father. You go into the bedroom and fetch my blue silk handkerchief. You can wear my black shawl while I'm out – there now!"

Rosa dragged it off her mother's shoulders and wound it carefully round her own, tying the two ends in a knot at the back. After all, she reflected, if she had to go to bed at half past eight she would keep the shawl on. Which resolution comforted her absolutely.

"Now, then, where are my clothes?" cried Herr Brechenmacher, hanging his empty letter-bag behind the door and stamping the snow out of his boots. "Nothing ready, of course, and everybody at the wedding by this time. I heard the music as I passed. What are you doing? You're not dressed. You can't go like that."



"Here they are – all ready for you on the table, and some warm water in the tin basin. Dip your head in. Rosa, give your father the towel. Everything ready except the trousers. I haven't had time to shorten them. You must tuck the ends into your boots until we get there."

"Nu," said the Herr, "there isn't room to turn. I want the light. You go and dress in the passage."

Dressing in the dark was nothing to Frau Brechenmacher. She hooked her skirt and bodice, fastened her handkerchief round her neck with a beautiful brooch that had four medals to the Virgin dangling from it, and then drew on her cloak and hood.

"Here, come and fasten this buckle," called Herr Brechenmacher. He stood in the kitchen puffing himself out, the buttons on his blue uniform shining with an enthusiasm which nothing but official buttons could possibly possess. "How do I look?"

"Wonderful," replied the little Frau, straining at the waist buckle and giving him a little pull here, a little tug there. "Rosa, come and look at your father."

Herr Brechenmacher strode up and down the kitchen, was helped on with his coat, then waited while the Frau lighted the lantern.

"Now, then – finished at last! Come along."

"The lamp, Rosa," warned the Frau, slamming the front door behind them.

Snow had not fallen all day; the frozen ground was slippery as an ice-pond. She had not been out of the house for weeks past, and the day had so flurried her that she felt muddled and stupid – felt that Rosa had pushed her out of the house and her man was running away from her.

"Wait, wait!" she cried.

"No. I'll get my feet damp – you hurry."

It was easier when they came into the village. There were fences to cling to, and leading from the railway station to the Gasthaus a little path of cinders had been strewn for the benefit of the wedding guests.



The Gasthaus was very festive. Lights shone out from every window, wreaths of fir twigs hung from the ledges. Branches decorated the front doors, which swung open, and in the hall the landlord voiced his superiority by bullying the waitresses, who ran about continually with glasses of beer, trays of cups and saucers, and bottles of wine.

"Up the stairs – up the stairs!" boomed the landlord. "Leave your coats on the landing."

Herr Brechenmacher, completely overawed by this grand manner, so far forgot his rights as a husband as to beg his wife's pardon for jostling her against the banisters in his efforts to get ahead of everybody else.

Herr Brechenmacher's colleagues greeted him with acclamation as he entered the door of the Festsaal, and the Frau straightened her brooch and folded her hands, assuming the air of dignity becoming to the wife of a postman and the mother of five children. Beautiful indeed was the Festsaal. Three long tables were grouped at one end, the remainder of the floor space cleared for dancing. Oil lamps, hanging from the ceiling, shed a warm, bright light on the walls decorated with paper flowers and garlands; shed a warmer, brighter light on the red faces of the guests in their best clothes.

At the head of the centre table sat the bride and bridegroom, she in a white dress trimmed with stripes and bows of coloured ribbon, giving her the appearance of an iced cake all ready to be cut and served in neat little pieces to the bridegroom beside her, who wore a suit of white clothes much too large for him and a white silk tie that rose halfway up his collar. Grouped about them, with a fine regard for dignity and precedence, sat their parents and relations; and perched on a stool at the bride's right hand a little girl in a crumpled muslin dress with a wreath of forget-me-nots hanging over one ear. Everybody was laughing and talking, shaking hands, clinking glasses, stamping on the floor – a stench of beer and perspiration filled the air.

Frau Brechenmacher, following her man down the room after greeting the bridal party, knew that she was going to enjoy herself. She seemed to fill out and become rosy and warm as she sniffed that familiar festive smell. Somebody pulled at her skirt, and, looking down, she saw Frau Rupp, the butcher's wife, who pulled out an empty chair and begged her to sit beside her.



"Fritz will get you some beer," she said. "My dear, your skirt is open at the back. We could not help laughing as you walked up the room with the white tape of your petticoat showing!"

"But how frightful!" said Frau Brechenmacher, collapsing into her chair and biting her lip.

"Na, it's over now," said Frau Rupp, stretching her fat hands over the table and regarding her three mourning rings with intense enjoyment; "but one must be careful, especially at a wedding."

"And such a wedding as this," cried Frau Ledermann, who sat on the other side of Frau Brechenmacher. "Fancy Theresa bringing that child with her. It's her own child, you know, my dear, and it's going to live with them. That's what I call a sin against the Church for a free-born child to attend its own mother's wedding."

The three women sat and stared at the bride, who remained very still, with a little vacant smile on her lips, only her eyes shifting uneasily from side to side.

"Beer they've given it, too," whispered Frau Rupp, "and white wine and an ice. It never did have a stomach; she ought to have left it at home."

Frau Brechenmacher turned round and looked towards the bride's mother. She never took her eyes off her daughter, but wrinkled her brown forehead like an old monkey, and nodded now and again very solemnly. Her hands shook as she raised her beer mug, and when she had drunk she spat on the floor and savagely wiped her mouth with her sleeve. Then the music started and she followed Theresa with her eyes, looking suspiciously at each man who danced with her.

"Cheer up, old woman," shouted her husband, digging her in the ribs; "this isn't Theresa's funeral." He winked at the guests, who broke into loud laughter.

"I *am* cheerful," mumbled the old woman, and beat upon the table with her fist, keeping time to the music, proving she was not out of the festivities.



"She can't forget how wild Theresa has been," said Frau Ledermann. "Who could – with the child there? I heard that last Sunday evening Theresa had hysterics and said that she would not marry this man. They had to get the priest to her."

"Where is the other one?" asked Frau Brechenmacher. "Why didn't he marry her?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Gone – disappeared. He was a traveller, and only stayed at their house two nights. He was selling shirt buttons – I bought some myself, and they were beautiful shirt buttons – but what a pig of a fellow! I can't think what he saw in such a plain girl – but you never know. Her mother says she's been like fire ever since she was sixteen!"

Frau Brechenmacher looked down at her beer and blew a little hole in the froth.

"That's not how a wedding should be," she said; "it's not religion to love two men."

"Nice time she'll have with this one," Frau Rupp exclaimed. "He was lodging with me last summer and I had to get rid of him. He never changed his clothes once in two months, and when I spoke to him of the smell in his room he told me he was sure it floated up from the shop. Ah, every wife has her cross. Isn't that true, my dear?"

Frau Brechenmacher saw her husband among his colleagues at the next table. He was drinking far too much, she knew – gesticulating wildly, the saliva spluttering out of his mouth as he talked.

"Yes," she assented, "that's true. Girls have a lot to learn."

Wedged in between these two fat old women, the Frau had no hope of being asked to dance. She watched the couples going round and round; she forgot her five babies and her man and felt almost like a girl again. The music sounded sad and sweet. Her roughened hands clasped and unclasped themselves in the folds of her skirt. While the music went on she was afraid to look anybody in the face, and she smiled with a little nervous tremor round the mouth.



"But, my God," Frau Rupp cried, "they've given that child of Theresa's a piece of sausage. It's to keep her quiet. There's going to be a presentation now – your man has to speak."

Frau Brechenmacher sat up stiffly. The music ceased, and the dancers took their places again at the tables.

Herr Brechenmacher alone remained standing – he held in his hands a big silver coffee-pot. Everybody laughed at his speech, except the Frau; everybody roared at his grimaces, and at the way he carried the coffee-pot to the bridal pair, as if it were a baby he was holding.

She lifted the lid, peeped in, then shut it down with a little scream and sat biting her lips. The bridegroom wrenched the pot away from her and drew forth a baby's bottle and two little cradles holding china dolls. As he dandled these treasures before Theresa the hot room seemed to heave and sway with laughter.

Frau Brechenmacher did not think it funny. She stared round at the laughing faces, and suddenly they all seemed strange to her. She wanted to go home and never come out again. She imagined that all these people were laughing at her, more people than there were in the room even – all laughing at her because they were so much stronger than she was.

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They walked home in silence. Herr Brechenmacher strode ahead, she stumbled after him. White and forsaken lay the road from the railway station to their house – a cold rush of wind blew her hood from her face, and suddenly she remembered how they had come home together the first night. Now they had five babies and twice as much money; *but* –

"Na, what is it all for?" she muttered, and not until she had reached home, and prepared a little supper of meat and bread for her man did she stop asking herself that silly question.

Herr Brechenmacher broke the bread into his plate, smeared it round with his fork and chewed greedily.

"Good?" she asked, leaning her arms on the table and pillowing her breast against them.



"But fine!"

He took a piece of the crumb, wiped it round his plate edge, and held it up to her mouth. She shook her head.

"Not hungry," she said.

"But it is one of the best pieces, and full of the fat."

He cleared the plate; then pulled off his boots and flung them into a corner.

"Not much of a wedding," he said, stretching out his feet and wiggling his toes in the worsted socks.

"N – no," she replied, taking up the discarded boots and placing them on the oven to dry.

Herr Brechenmacher yawned and stretched himself, and then looked up at her, grinning.

"Remember the night that we came home? You were an innocent one, you were."

"Get along! Such a time ago I forget." Well she remembered.

"Such a clout on the ear as you gave me But I soon taught you."

"Oh, don't start talking. You've too much beer. Come to bed."

He tilted back in his chair, chuckling with laughter.

"That's not what you said to me that night. God, the trouble you gave me!"

But the little Frau seized the candle and went into the next room. The children were all soundly sleeping. She stripped the mattress off the baby's bed to see if he was still dry, then began unfastening her blouse and skirt.

"Always the same," she said – "all over the world the same; but, God in heaven – but *stupid*."



Then even the memory of the wedding faded quite. She lay down on the bed and put her arm across her face like a child who expected to be hurt as Herr Brechenmacher lurched in.

