



FRAU FISCHER (1910)

By Katherine Mansfield

Frau Fischer was the fortunate possessor of a candle factory somewhere on the banks of the Eger, and once a year she ceased from her labours to make a "cure" in Dorschhausen, arriving with a dress-basket neatly covered in a black tarpaulin and a hand-bag. The latter contained amongst her handkerchiefs, eau de Cologne, toothpicks, and a certain woollen muffler very comforting to the "magen," samples of her skill in candle-making, to be offered up as tokens of thanksgiving when her holiday time was over.

Four of the clock one July afternoon she appeared at the Pension Müller. I was sitting in the arbour and watched her bustling up the path followed by the red-bearded porter with her dress-basket in his arms and a sunflower between his teeth. The widow and her five innocent daughters stood tastefully grouped upon the steps in appropriate attitudes of welcome; and the greetings were so long and loud that I felt a sympathetic glow.

"What a journey!" cried the Frau Fischer. "And nothing to eat in the train--nothing solid. I assure you the sides of my stomach are flapping together. But I must not spoil my appetite for dinner – just a cup of coffee in my room. Bertha," turning to the youngest of the five, "how changed! What a bust! Frau Hartmann, I congratulate you."

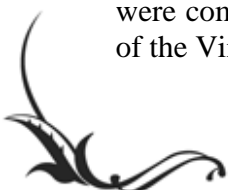
Once again the Widow seized Frau Fischer's hands. "Kathi, too, a splendid woman; but a little pale. Perhaps the young man from Nürnberg is here again this year. How you keep them all I don't know. Each year I come expecting to find you with an empty nest. It's surprising."

Frau Hartmann, in an ashamed, apologetic voice: "We are such a happy family since my dear man died."

"But these marriages – one must have courage; and after all, give them time, they all make the happy family bigger – thank God for that...Are there many people here just now?"

"Every room engaged."

Followed a detailed description in the hall, murmured on the stairs, continued in six parts as they entered the large room (windows opening upon the garden) which Frau Fischer occupied each successive year. I was reading the "Miracles of Lourdes," which a Catholic priest – fixing a gloomy eye upon my soul – had begged me to digest; but its wonders were completely routed by Frau Fischer's arrival. Not even the white roses upon the feet of the Virgin could flourish in that atmosphere.



". . . It was a simple shepherd-child who pastured her flocks upon the barren fields . . ."

Voices from the room above: "The washstand has, of course, been scrubbed over with soda."

". . . Poverty-stricken, her limbs with tattered rags half covered . . ."

"Every stick of the furniture has been sunning in the garden for three days. And the carpet we made ourselves out of old clothes. There is a piece of that beautiful flannel petticoat you left us last summer."

". . . Deaf and dumb was the child; in fact, the population considered her half idiot . . ."

"Yes, that is a new picture of the Kaiser. We have moved the thorn-crowned one of Jesus Christ out into the passage. It was not cheerful to sleep with. Dear Frau Fischer, won't you take your coffee out in the garden?"

"That is a very nice idea. But first I must remove my corsets and my boots. Ah, what a relief to wear sandals again. I am needing the 'cure' very badly this year. My nerves! I am a mass of them. During the entire journey I sat with my handkerchief over my head, even while the guard collected the tickets. Exhausted!"

She came into the arbour wearing a black and white spotted dressing-gown, and a calico cap peaked with patent leather, followed by Kathi, carrying the little blue jugs of malt coffee. We were formally introduced. Frau Fischer sat down, produced a perfectly clean pocket handkerchief and polished her cup and saucer, then lifted the lid of the coffee-pot and peered in at the contents mournfully.

"Malt coffee," she said. "Ah, for the first few days I wonder how I can put up with it. Naturally, absent from home one must expect much discomfort and strange food. But as I used to say to my dear husband: with a clean sheet and a good cup of coffee I can find my happiness anywhere. But now, with nerves like mine, no sacrifice is too terrible for me to make. What complaint are you suffering from? You look exceedingly healthy!"

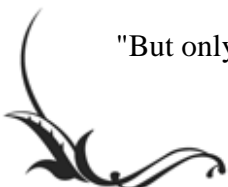
I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

"Ah, that is so strange about you English. You do not seem to enjoy discussing the functions of the body. As well speak of a railway train and refuse to mention the engine. How can we hope to understand anybody, knowing nothing of their stomachs? In my husband's most severe illness – the poultices –"

She dipped a piece of sugar in her coffee and watched it dissolve.

"Yet a young friend of mine who travelled to England for the funeral of his brother told me that women wore bodices in public restaurants no waiter could help looking into as he handed the soup."

"But only German waiters," I said. "English ones look over the top of your head."



"There," she cried, "now you see your dependence on Germany. Not even an efficient waiter can you have by yourselves."

"But I prefer them to look over your head."

"And that proves that you must be ashamed of your bodice."

I looked out over the garden full of wall-flowers and standard rose-trees growing stiffly like German bouquets, feeling I did not care one way or the other. I rather wanted to ask her if the young friend had gone to England in the capacity of waiter to attend the funeral baked meats, but decided it was not worth it. The weather was too hot to be malicious, and who could be uncharitable, victimised by the flapping sensations which Frau Fischer was enduring until six-thirty? As a gift from heaven for my forbearance, down the path towards us came the Herr Rat, angelically clad in a white silk suit. He and Frau Fischer were old friends. She drew the folds of her dressing-gown together, and made room for him on the little green bench.

"How cool you are looking," she said; "and if I may make the remark – what a beautiful suit!"

"Surely I wore it last summer when you were here? I brought the silk from China – smuggled it through the Russian customs by swathing it round my body. And such a quantity: two dress lengths for my sister-in-law, three suits for myself, a cloak for the housekeeper of my flat in Munich. How I perspired! Every inch of it had to be washed afterwards."

"Surely you have had more adventures than any man in Germany. When I think of the time that you spent in Turkey with a drunken guide who was bitten by a mad dog and fell over a precipice into a field of attar of roses, I lament that you have not written a book."

"Time – time. I am getting a few notes together. And now that you are here we shall renew our quiet little talks after supper. Yes? It is necessary and pleasant for a man to find relaxation in the company of women occasionally."

"Indeed I realise that. Even here your life is too strenuous – you are so sought after – so admired. It was just the same with my dear husband. He was a tall, beautiful man, and sometimes in the evening he would come down into the kitchen and say: 'Wife, I would like to be stupid for two minutes.' Nothing rested him so much then as for me to stroke his head."

The Herr Rat's bald pate glistening in the sunlight seemed symbolical of the sad absence of a wife.

I began to wonder as to the nature of these quiet little after-supper talks. How could one play Delilah to so shorn a Samson?

"Herr Hoffmann from Berlin arrived yesterday," said the Herr Rat.



"That young man I refuse to converse with. He told me last year that he had stayed in France in an hotel where they did not have serviettes; what a place it must have been! In Austria even the cabmen have serviettes. Also I have heard that he discussed 'free love' with Bertha as she was sweeping his room. I am not accustomed to such company. I had suspected him for a long time."

"Young blood," answered the Herr Rat genially. "I have had several disputes with him – you have heard them – is it not so?" turning to me.

"A great many," I said, smiling.

"Doubtless you too consider me behind the times. I make no secret of my age; I am sixty-nine; but you must have surely observed how impossible it was for him to speak at all when I raised my voice."

I replied with the utmost conviction, and, catching Frau Fischer's eye, suddenly realised I had better go back to the house and write some letters.

It was dark and cool in my room. A chestnut tree pushed green boughs against the window. I looked down at the horsehair sofa so openly flouting the idea of curling up as immoral, pulled the red pillow on to the floor and lay down. And barely had I got comfortable when the door opened and Frau Fischer entered.

"The Herr Rat had a bathing appointment," she said, shutting the door after her. "May I come in? Pray do not move. You look like a little Persian kitten. Now, tell me something really interesting about your life. When I meet new people I squeeze them dry like a sponge. To begin with – you are married."

I admit the fact.

"Then, dear child, where is your husband?"

I said he was a sea-captain on a long and perilous voyage.

"What a position to leave you in – so young and so unprotected."

She sat down on the sofa and shook her finger at me playfully.

"Admit, now, that you keep your journeys secret from him. For what man would think of allowing a woman with such a wealth of hair to go wandering in foreign countries? Now, supposing that you lost your purse at midnight in a snowbound train in North Russia?"

"But I haven't the slightest intention – " I began.

"I don't say that you have. But when you said good-bye to your dear man I am positive that you had no intention of coming here. My dear, I am a woman of experience, and I know the world. While he is away you have a fever in your blood. Your sad heart flies for comfort to these foreign lands. At home you cannot bear the sight of that empty bed – it



is like widowhood. Since the death of my dear husband I have never known an hour's peace."

"I like empty beds," I protested sleepily, thumping the pillow.

"That cannot be true because it is not natural. Every wife ought to feel that her place is by her husband's side – sleeping or waking. It is plain to see that the strongest tie of all does not yet bind you. Wait until a little pair of hands stretches across the water – wait until he comes into harbour and sees you with the child at your breast."

I sat up stiffly.

"But I consider child-bearing the most ignominious of all professions," I said.

For a moment there was silence. Then Frau Fischer reached down and caught my hand.

"So young and yet to suffer so cruelly," she murmured. "There is nothing that sours a woman so terribly as to be left alone without a man, especially if she is married, for then it is impossible for her to accept the attention of others – unless she is unfortunately a widow. Of course, I know that sea-captains are subject to terrible temptations, and they are as inflammable as tenor singers – that is why you must present a bright and energetic appearance, and try and make him proud of you when his ship reaches port."

This husband that I had created for the benefit of Frau Fischer became in her hands so substantial a figure that I could no longer see myself sitting on a rock with seaweed in my hair, awaiting that phantom ship for which all women love to suppose they hunger. Rather I saw myself pushing a perambulator up the gangway, and counting up the missing buttons on my husband's uniform jacket.

"Handfuls of babies, that is what you are really in need of," mused Frau Fischer. "Then, as the father of a family he cannot leave you. Think of his delight and excitement when he saw you!"

The plan seemed to me something of a risk. To appear suddenly with handfuls of strange babies is not generally calculated to raise enthusiasm in the heart of the average British husband. I decided to wreck my virgin conception and send him down somewhere off Cape Horn.

Then the dinner-gong sounded.

"Come up to my room afterwards," said Frau Fischer. "There is still much that I must ask you."

She squeezed my hand, but I did not squeeze back.

