



PICTURES (1919)

By Katherine Mansfield

EIGHT o'clock in the morning. Miss Ada Moss lay in a black iron bedstead, staring up at the ceiling. Her room, a Bloomsbury top-floor back, smelled of soot and face powder and the paper of fried potatoes she brought in for supper the night before.

"Oh, dear," thought Miss Moss, "I am cold. I wonder why it is that I always wake up so cold in the mornings now. My knees and feet and my back—especially my back; it's like a sheet of ice. And I always was such a one for being warm in the old days. It's not as if I was skinny—I'm just the same full figure that I used to be. No, it's because I don't have a good hot dinner in the evenings."

A pageant of Good Hot Dinners passed across the ceiling, each of them accompanied by a bottle of Nourishing Stout. . . .

"Even if I were to get up now," she thought, "and have a sensible substantial breakfast . . .
"A pageant of Sensible Substantial Breakfasts followed the dinners across the ceiling, shepherded by an enormous, white, uncut ham. Miss Moss shuddered and disappeared under the bedclothes. Suddenly, in bounced the landlady.

"There's a letter for you, Miss Moss."

"Oh," said Miss Moss, far too friendly, "thank you very much, Mrs. Pine. It's very good of you, I'm sure, to take the trouble."

"No trouble at all," said the landlady. "I thought perhaps it was the letter you'd been expecting."

"Why," said Miss Moss brightly, "yes, perhaps it is." She put her head on one side and smiled vaguely at the letter. "I shouldn't be surprised."

The landlady's eyes popped. "Well, I should, Miss Moss," said she, "and that's how it is. And I'll trouble you to open it, if you please. Many is the lady in my place as would have done it for you and have been within her rights. For things can't go on like this, Miss Moss, no indeed they can't. What with week in week out and first you've got it and then you haven't, and then it's another letter lost in the post or another manager down at Brighton but will be back on Tuesday for certain—I'm fair sick and tired and I won't stand it no more. Why should I, Miss Moss, I ask you, at a time like this, with prices flying up in the air and my poor dear lad in France? My sister Eliza was only saying to me yesterday—'Minnie,' she says, 'you're too soft-hearted. You could have let that room time and time again,' says she, 'and if people won't look after themselves in times like these,



nobody else will,' she says. 'She may have had a College education and sung in West End concerts,' says she, 'but if your Lizzie says what's true,' she says, 'and she's washing her own wovens and drying them on the towel rail, it's easy to see where the finger's pointing. And it's high time you had done with it,' says she."

Miss Moss gave no sign of having heard this. She sat up in bed, tore open her letter, and read:

Dear Madam,

Yours to hand. Am not producing at present, but have filed photo for future ref.

Yours truly,
BACKWASH FILM CO.

This letter seemed to afford her peculiar satisfaction; she read it through twice before replying to the landlady.

"Well, Mrs. Pine, I think you'll be sorry for what you said. This is from a manager, asking me to be there with evening dress at ten o'clock next Saturday morning."

But the landlady was too quick for her. She pounced, secured the letter.

"Oh, is it! Is it indeed! " she cried.

"Give me back that letter. Give it back to me at once, you bad, wicked woman," cried Miss Moss, who could not get out of bed because her nightdress was slit down the back. "Give me back my private letter." The landlady began slowly backing out of the room, holding the letter to her buttoned bodice.

"So it's come to this, has it?" said she. "Well, Miss Moss; if I don't get my rent at eight o'clock tonight, we'll see who's a bad, wicked woman—that's all." Here she nodded, mysteriously. "And I'll keep this letter." Here her voice rose. "It will be a pretty little bit of evidence! " And here it fell, sepulchral, "*My lady.*"

The door banged and Miss Moss was alone. She flung off the bed clothes, and sitting by the side of the bed, furious and shivering, she stared at her fat white legs with their great knots of greeny-blue veins.

"Cockroach! That's what she is. She's a cockroach!" said Miss Moss. "I could have her up for snatching my letter—I'm sure I could." Still keeping on her nightdress she began to drag on her clothes.

"Oh, if I could only pay that woman, I'd give her a piece of my mind that she wouldn't forget. I'd tell her off proper." She went over to the chest of drawers for a safety-pin, and seeing herself in the glass she gave a vague smile and shook her head. "Well, old girl," she murmured, "you're up against it this time, and no mistake" But the person in the glass made an ugly face at her.



"You silly thing," scolded Miss Moss. "Now what's the good of crying: you'll only make your nose red. No, you get dressed and go out and try your luck—that's what you've got to do."

She unhooked her vanity bag from the bedpost, rooted in it, shook it, turned it inside out.

"I'll have a nice cup of tea at an A B C to settle me before I go anywhere," she decided. "I've got one and thrippence—yes, just one and three."

Ten minutes later, a stout lady in blue serge, with a bunch of artificial "parmas" at her bosom, a black hat covered with purple pansies, white gloves, boots with white uppers, and a vanity bag containing one and three, sang in a low contralto voice:

Sweet-heart, remember when days are forlorn
It al-ways is dar-kest before the dawn.

But the person in the glass. made a face at her, and Miss Moss went out. There were grey crabs all the way down the street slopping water over grey stone steps. With his strange, hawking cry and the jangle of the cans the milk boy went his rounds. Outside Brittweiler's Swiss House he made a splash, and an old brown cat without a tail appeared from nowhere, and began greedily and silently drinking up the spill. It gave Miss Moss a queer feeling to watch—a sinking—as you might say.

But when she came to the A B C she found the door propped open; a man went in and out carrying trays of rolls, and there was nobody inside except a waitress doing her hair and the cashier unlocking the cash-boxes. She stood in the middle of the floor but neither of them saw her.

"My boy came home last night," sang the waitress.

"Oh, I say—how topping for you!" gurgled the cashier.

"Yes, wasn't it," sang the waitress. "He brought me a sweet little brooch. Look, it's got 'Dieppe' written on it."

The cashier ran across to look and put her arm round the waitress' neck.

"Oh, I say—how topping for you."

"Yes, isn't it," said the waitress. "O-oh, he is brahn. 'Hullo,' I said, 'hullo, old mahogany.'"

"Oh, I say," gurgled the cashier, running back into her cage and nearly bumping into Miss Moss on the way. "You are a *treat!*" Then the man with the rolls came in again, swerving past her.

"Can I have a cup of tea, Miss?" she asked.



But the waitress went on doing her hair. "Oh," she sang, "we're not *open* yet." She turned round and waved her comb at the cashier.

"*Are we, dear?*"

"Oh, no," said the cashier. Miss Moss went out.

"I'll go to Charing Cross. Yes, that's what I'll do," she decided. "But I won't have a cup of tea. No, I'll have a coffee. There's more of a tonic in coffee. . . . Cheeky, those girls are! Her boy came home last night; he brought her a brooch with 'Dieppe' written on it." She began to cross the road. . . .

"Look out, Fattie; don't go to sleep!" yelled a taxi driver. She pretended not to hear.

"No, I won't go to Charing Cross," she decided. "I'll go straight to Kig and Kadgit. They're open at nine. If I get there early Mr. Kadgit may have something by the morning's post. . . . I'm very glad you turned up so early, Miss Moss. I've just heard from a manager who wants a lady to play. . . . I think you'll just suit him. I'll give you a card to go and see him. It's three pounds a week and all found. If I were you I'd hop round as fast as I could. Lucky you turned up so early . . ."

But there was nobody at Kig and Kadgit's except the char-woman wiping over the "lino" in the passage.

"Nobody here yet, Miss," said the char.

"Oh, isn't Mr. Kadgit here?" said Miss Moss, trying to dodge the pail and brush. "Well, I'll just wait a moment, if I may."

"You can't wait in the waiting-room, Miss. I 'aven't done it yet. Mr. Kadgit's never 'ere before 'leven-thirty Saturdays. Sometimes 'e don't come at all." And the char began crawling towards her.

"Dear me—how silly of me," said Miss Moss. "I forgot it was Saturday."

"Mind your feet, *please*, Miss," said the char. And Miss Moss was outside again.

That was one thing about Beit and Bithems; it was lively. You walked into the waiting-room, into a great buzz of conversation, and there was everybody; you knew almost everybody. The early ones sat on chairs and the later ones sat on the early ones' laps, while the gentlemen leaned negligently against the wails or preened themselves in front of the admiring ladies.

"Hello," said Miss Moss, very gay. "Here we are again!"

And young Mr. Clayton, playing the banjo on his walking-stick sang: "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee."



"Mr. Bithem here yet?" asked Miss Moss, taking out an old dead powder puff and powdering her nose mauve.

"Oh, yes, dear," cried the chorus. "He's been here for ages. We've all been waiting here for more than an hour."

"Dear me!" said Miss Moss. "Anything doing, do you think?"

"Oh, a few jobs going for South Africa," said young Mr. Clayton. "Hundred and fifty a week for two years, you know."

"Oh!" cried the chorus. "You *are* weird, Mr. Clayton. Isn't he a *cure*? Isn't he a *scream*, dear? Oh, Mr. Clayton, you do make me laugh. Isn't he a *comic*?"

A dark mournful girl touched Miss Moss on the arm.

"I just missed a lovely job yesterday," she said. "Six weeks in the provinces and then the West End. The manager said I would have got it for certain if only I'd been robust enough. He said if my figure had been fuller, the part was made for me." She stared at Miss Moss, and the dirty dark red rose under the brim of her hat looked, somehow, as though it shared the blow with her, and was crushed, too.

"Oh, dear, that was hard lines," said Miss Moss trying to appear indifferent. "What was it—if I may ask?"

But the dark, mournful girl saw through her and a gleam of spite came into her heavy eyes.

"Oh, no good to you, my dear," said she. "He wanted someone young, you know—a dark Spanish type—my style, but more figure, that was all."

The inner door opened and Mr. Bithem appeared in his shirt sleeves. He kept one hand on the door ready to whisk back again, and held up the other.

"Look here, ladies—" and then he paused, grinned his famous grin before he said—"and *bhoys*." The waiting-room laughed so loudly at this that he had to hold both hands up. "It's no good waiting this morning. Come back Monday; I'm expecting several calls on Monday."

Miss Moss made a desperate rush forward. "Mr. Bithem, I wonder if you've heard from . . ."

"Now let me see," said Mr. Bithem slowly, staring; he had only seen Miss Moss four times a week for the past—how many weeks? "Now, who are you?"

"Miss Ada Moss."



"Oh, yes, yes; of course, my dear. Not yet, my dear. Now I had a call for twenty-eight ladies today, but they had to be young and able to hop it a bit—see? And I had another call for sixteen—but they had to know something about sand-dancing. Look here, my dear, I'm up to the eyebrows this morning. Come back on Monday week; it's no good coming before that." He gave her a whole grin to herself and patted her fat back. "Hearts of oak, dear lady," said Mr. Bithem, "hearts of oak!"

At the North-East Film Company the crowd was all the way up the stairs. Miss Moss found herself next to a fair little baby thing about thirty in a white lace hat with cherries round it.

"What a crowd!" said she. "Anything special on?"

"*Didn't* you know, dear?" said the baby, opening her immense pale eyes. "There was a call at nine-thirty for *attractive* girls. We've all been waiting for *hours*. Have you played for this company before?" Miss Moss put her head on one side. "No, I don't think I have."

"They're a lovely company to play for," said the baby. "A friend of mine has a friend who gets thirty pounds a day. . . . Have you *arcted* much for the *fil* -lums?"

"Well, I'm not an actress by profession," confessed Miss Moss. "I'm a contralto singer. But things have been so bad lately that I've been doing a little."

"It's *like* that, isn't it, dear?" said the baby.

"I had a splendid education at the College of Music," said Miss Moss, "and I got my silver medal for singing. I've often sung at West End concerts. But I thought, for a change, I'd try my luck . . ."

"Yes, it's *like* that, isn't it, dear?" said the baby.

At that moment a beautiful typist appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Are you all waiting for the North-East call?"

"Yes!" cried the chorus.

"Well, it's off. I've just had a phone through."

"But look here! What about our expenses?" shouted a voice.

The typist looked down at them, and she couldn't help laughing.

"Oh, you weren't to have been *paid*. The North-East never *pay* their crowds."

There was only a little round window at the Bitter Orange Company. No waiting-room - nobody at all except a girl, who came to the window when Miss Moss knocked, and said: "Well?"



"Can I see the producer, please?" said Miss Moss pleasantly. The girl leaned on the window-bar, half-shut her eyes, and seemed to go to sleep for a moment. Miss Moss smiled at her. The girl not only frowned; she seemed to smell something vaguely unpleasant; she sniffed. Suddenly she moved away, came back with a paper, and thrust it at Miss Moss.

"Fill up the form!" said she. And banged the window down.

"Can you aviate—high-dive—drive a car—buck-jump—shoot?" read Miss Moss. She walked along the street asking herself those questions. There was a high, cold wind blowing; it tugged at her, slapped her face, jeered; it knew she could not answer them. In the Square Gardens she found a little wire basket to drop the form into. And then she sat down on one of the benches to powder her nose. But the person in the pocket mirror made a hideous face at her, and that was too much for Miss Moss; she had a good cry. It cheered her wonderfully.

"Well, that's over," she sighed. "It's one comfort to be off my feet. And my nose will soon get cool in the air. . . . It's very nice in here. Look at the sparrows. Cheep. Cheep. How close they come. I expect somebody feeds them. No, I've nothing for you, you cheeky little things. . . ." She looked away from them. What was the big building opposite—the Café de Madrid? My goodness, what a smack that little child came down! Poor little mite! Never mind—up again. . . . By eight o'clock tonight . . . Café de Madrid. "I could just go in and sit there and have a coffee, that's all," thought Miss Moss. "It's such a place for artists too. I might just have a stroke of luck. . . . A dark handsome gentleman in a fur coat comes in with a friend, and sits at my table, perhaps. 'No, old chap, I've searched London for a contralto and I can't find a soul. You see, the music is difficult; have a look at it.'" And Miss Moss heard herself saying: "Excuse me, I happen to be a contralto, and I have sung that part many times. . . . Extraordinary! 'Come back to my studio and I'll try your voice now.' . . . Ten pounds a week. . . . Why should I feel nervous? It's not nervousness. Why shouldn't I go to the Café de Madrid? I'm a respectable woman—I'm a contralto singer. And I'm only trembling because I've had nothing to eat today. . . . 'A nice little piece of evidence, *my lady*.' . . . Very well, Mrs. Pine. Café de Madrid. They have concerts there in the evenings. . . . 'Why don't they begin?' The contralto has not arrived. . . . 'Excuse me, I happen to be a contralto; I have sung that music many times.'"

It was almost dark in the café. Men, palms, red plush seats, white marble tables, waiters in aprons, Miss Moss walked through them all. Hardly had she sat down when a very stout gentleman wearing a very small hat that floated on the top of his head like a little yacht flopped into the chair opposite hers.

"Good evening!" said he.

Miss Moss said, in her cheerful way: "Good evening!"

"Fine evening," said the stout gentleman.

"Yes, very fine. Quite a treat, isn't it?" said she.



He crooked a sausage finger at the waiter—"Bring me a large whisky"—and turned to Miss Moss. "What's yours?"

"Well, I think I'll take a brandy if it's all the same."

Five minutes later the stout gentleman leaned across the table and blew a puff of cigar smoke full in her face.

"That's a tempting bit o' ribbon!" said he.

Miss Moss blushed until a pulse at the top of her head that she never had felt before pounded away.

"I always was one for pink," said she.

The stout gentleman considered her, drumming with her fingers on the table.

"I like 'em firm and well covered," said he.

Miss Moss, to her surprise, gave a loud snigger.

Five minutes later the stout gentleman heaved himself up. "Well, am I goin' your way, or are you comin' mine?" he asked.

"I'll come with you, if it's all the same," said Miss Moss. And she sailed after the little yacht out of the café.

