



POISON (1920)

By Katherine Mansfield

The post was very late. When we came back from our walk after lunch it still had not arrived.

"Pas encore, Madame," sang Annette, scurrying back to her cooking.

We carried our parcels into the dining-room. The table was laid. As always, the sight of the table laid for two—for two people only—and yet so finished, so perfect, there was no possible room for a third, gave me a queer, quick thrill as though I'd been struck by that silver lightning that quivered over the white cloth, the brilliant glasses, the shallow bowl of freesias.

"Blow the old postman! Whatever can have happened to him?" said Beatrice. "Put those things down, dearest."

"Where would you like them ...?"

She raised her head; she smiled her sweet, teasing smile.

"Anywhere—Silly."

But I knew only too well that there was no such place for her, and I would have stood holding the squat liqueur bottle and the sweets for months, for years, rather than risk giving another tiny shock to her exquisite sense of order.

"Here—I'll take them." She plumped them down on the table with her long gloves and a basket of figs. "The Luncheon Table. Short story by—by—" She took my arm. "Let's go on to the terrace—" and I felt her shiver. "*Ça sent,*" she said faintly, "*de la cuisine ...*"

I had noticed lately—we had been living in the south for two months—that when she wished to speak of food, or the climate, or, playfully, of her love for me, she always dropped into French.

We perched on the balustrade under the awning. Beatrice leaned over gazing down—down to the white road with its guard of cactus spears. The beauty of her ear, just her ear, the marvel of it was so great that I could have turned from regarding it to all that sweep of glittering sea below and stammered: "You know—her ear! She has ears that are simply the most ..."



She was dressed in white, with pearls round her throat and lilies-of-the-valley tucked into her belt. On the third finger of her left hand she wore one pearl ring—no wedding ring.

“Why should I, *mon ami*? Why should we pretend? Who could possibly care?”

And of course I agreed, though privately, in the depths of my heart, I would have given my soul to have stood beside her in a large, yes, a large, fashionable church, crammed with people, with old reverend clergymen, with *The Voice that breathed o'er Eden*, with palms and the smell of scent, knowing there was a red carpet and confetti outside, and somewhere, a wedding-cake and champagne and a satin shoe to throw after the carriage—if I could have slipped our wedding-ring on to her finger.

Not because I cared for such horrible shows, but because I felt it might possibly perhaps lessen this ghastly feeling of absolute freedom, *her* absolute freedom, of course.

Oh, God! What torture happiness was—what anguish! I looked up at the villa, at the windows of our room hidden so mysteriously behind the green straw blinds. Was it possible that she ever came moving through the green light and smiling that secret smile, that languid, brilliant smile that was just for me? She put her arm round my neck; the other hand softly, terribly, brushed back my hair.

“Who are you?” Who was she? She was—Woman.

... On the first warm evening in Spring, when lights shone like pearls through the lilac air and voices murmured in the fresh-flowering gardens, it was she who sang in the tall house with the tulle curtains. As one drove in the moonlight through the foreign city hers was the shadow that fell across the quivering gold of the shutters. When the lamp was lighted, in the new-born stillness her steps passed your door. And she looked out into the autumn twilight, pale in her furs, as the automobile swept by ...

In fact, to put it shortly, I was twenty-four at the time. And when she lay on her back, with the pearls slipped under her chin, and sighed “I'm thirsty, dearest. *Donne-moi un orange*,” I would gladly, willingly, have dived for an orange into the jaws of a crocodile—if crocodiles ate oranges.

“Had I two little feathery wings
And were a little feathery bird ...”

sang Beatrice.

I seized her hand. “You wouldn't fly away?”

“Not far. Not further than the bottom of the road.”

“Why on earth there?”

She quoted: “He cometh not, she said ...”



“Who? The silly old postman? But you're not expecting a letter.”

“No, but it's maddening all the same. Ah!” Suddenly she laughed and leaned against me. “There he is—look—like a blue beetle.”

And we pressed our cheeks together and watched the blue beetle beginning to climb.

“Dearest,” breathed Beatrice. And the word seemed to linger in the air, to throb in the air like the note of a violin.

“What is it?”

“I don't know,” she laughed softly. “A wave of—a wave of affection, I suppose.”

I put my arm round her. “Then you wouldn't fly away?”

And she said rapidly and softly: “No! No! Not for worlds. Not really. I love this place. I've loved being here. I could stay here for years, I believe. I've never been so happy as I have these last two months, and you've been so perfect to me, dearest, in every way.”

This was such bliss—it was so extraordinary, so unprecedented, to hear her talk like this that I had to try to laugh it off.

“Don't! You sound as if you were saying good-bye.”

“Oh, nonsense, nonsense. You mustn't say such things even in fun!” She slid her little hand under my white jacket and clutched my shoulder. “You've been happy, haven't you?”

“Happy? Happy? Oh, God—if you knew what I feel at this moment ... Happy! My Wonder! My Joy!”

I dropped off the balustrade and embraced her, lifting her in my arms. And while I held her lifted I pressed my face in her breast and muttered: “You *are* mine?” And for the first time in all the desperate months I'd known her, even counting the last month of—surely—Heaven—I believed her absolutely when she answered:

“Yes, I am yours.”

The creak of the gate and the postman's steps on the gravel drew us apart. I was dizzy for the moment. I simply stood there, smiling, I felt, rather stupidly. Beatrice walked over to the cane chairs.

“You go—go for the letters,” said she.

I—well—I almost reeled away. But I was too late. Annette came running. “*Pas de lettres*” said she.



My reckless smile in reply as she handed me the paper must have surprised her. I was wild with joy. I threw the paper up into the air and sang out:

“No letters, darling!” as I came over to where the beloved woman was lying in the long chair.

For a moment she did not reply. Then she said slowly as she tore off the newspaper wrapper: “The world forgetting, *by* the world forgot.”

There are times when a cigarette is just the very one thing that will carry you over the moment. It is more than a confederate, even; it is a secret, perfect little friend who knows all about it and understands absolutely. While you smoke you look down at it—smile or frown, as the occasion demands; you inhale deeply and expel the smoke in a slow fan. This was one of those moments. I walked over to the magnolia and breathed my fill of it. Then I came back and leaned over her shoulder. But quickly she tossed the paper away on to the stone.

“There's nothing in it,” said she. “Nothing. There's only some poison trial. Either some man did or didn't murder his wife, and twenty thousand people have sat in court every day and two million words have been wired all over the world after each proceeding.”

“Silly world!” said I, flinging into another chair. I wanted to forget the paper, to return, but cautiously, of course, to that moment before the postman came. But when she answered I knew from her voice the moment was over for now. Never mind. I was content to wait—five hundred years, if need be—now that I knew.

“Not so very silly,” said Beatrice. “After all it isn't only morbid curiosity on the part of the twenty thousand.”

“What is it, darling?” Heavens knows I didn't care.

“Guilt! “she cried. “Guilt! Didn't you realise that? They're fascinated like sick people are fascinated by anything—any scrap of news about their own case. The man in the dock may be innocent enough, but the people in court are nearly all of them poisoners. Haven't you ever thought” —she was pale with excitement— “of the amount of poisoning that goes on? It's the exception to find married people who don't poison each other— married people and lovers. Oh,” she cried, “the number of cups of tea, glasses of wine, cups of coffee that are just tainted. The number I've had myself, and drunk, either knowing or not knowing—and risked it. The only reason why so many couples”—she laughed—” *survive*, is because the one is frightened of giving the other the fatal dose. That dose takes nerve! But it's bound to come sooner or later. There's no going back once the first little dose has been given. It's the beginning of the end, really—don't you agree?”

Don't you see what I mean?”

She didn't wait for me to answer. She unpinned the lilies-of-the-valley and lay back, drawing them across her eyes.



“Both my husbands poisoned me,” said Beatrice. “My first husband gave me a huge dose almost immediately, but my second was really an artist in his way. Just a tiny pinch, now and again, cleverly disguised—Oh, so cleverly! —until one morning I woke up and in every single particle of me, to the ends of my fingers and toes, there was a tiny grain. I was just in time ...”

I hated to hear her mention her husbands so calmly, especially to-day. It hurt. I was going to speak, but suddenly she cried mournfully:

“Why! Why should it have happened to me? What have I done? Why have I been all my life singled out by ... It's a conspiracy.”

I tried to tell her it was because she was too perfect for this horrible world—too exquisite, too fine. It frightened people. I made a little joke.

“But I—I haven't tried to poison you.”

Beatrice gave a queer small laugh and bit the end of a lily stem.

“You!” said she. “You wouldn't hurt a fly!”

Strange. That hurt, though. Most horribly.

Just then Annette ran out with our *apéritifs*. Beatrice leaned forward and took a glass from the tray and handed it to me. I noticed the gleam of the pearl on what I called her pearl finger. How could I be hurt at what she said?

“And you,” I said, taking the glass, “you've never poisoned anybody.”

That gave me an idea; I tried to explain. “You—you do just the opposite. What is the name for one like you who, instead of poisoning people, fills them—everybody, the postman, the man who drives us, our boatman, the flower-seller, me—with new life, with something of her own radiance, her beauty, her—”

Dreamily she smiled; dreamily she looked at me.

“What are you thinking of—my lovely darling?”

“I was wondering,” she said, “whether, after lunch, you'd go down to the post-office and ask for the afternoon letters. Would you mind, dearest? Not that I'm expecting one — but—I just thought, perhaps—it's silly not to have the letters if they're there. Isn't it? Silly to wait till to-morrow.” She twirled the stem of the glass in her fingers. Her beautiful head was bent. But I lifted my glass and drank, sipped rather—sipped slowly, deliberately, looking at that dark head and thinking of—postmen and blue beetles and farewells that were not farewells and ...

Good God! Was it fancy? No, it wasn't fancy. The drink tasted chill, bitter, *queer*.

