



## THE BARON (1910)

By Katherine Mansfield

"Who is he?" I said. "And why does he sit always alone, with his back to us, too?"

"Ah!" whispered the Frau Oberregierungsrat, "he is a *Baron*."

She looked at me very solemnly, and yet with the slightest possible contempt – a "fancy-not-recognising-that-at-the-first-glance" expression.

"But, poor soul, he cannot help it," I said. "Surely that unfortunate fact ought not to debar him from the pleasures of intellectual intercourse."

If it had not been for her fork I think she would have crossed herself.

"Surely you cannot understand. He is one of the First Barons."

More than a little unnerved, she turned and spoke to the Frau Doktor on her left.

"My omelette is empty – *empty*," she protested, "and this is the third I have tried!"

I looked at the First of the Barons. He was eating salad—taking a whole lettuce leaf on his fork and absorbing it slowly, rabbit-wise – a fascinating process to watch.

Small and slight, with scanty black hair and beard and yellow-toned complexion, he invariably wore black serge clothes, a rough linen shirt, black sandals, and the largest black rimmed spectacles that I had ever seen.

The Herr Oberlehrer, who sat opposite me, smiled benignantly.

"It must be very interesting for you, gnädige Frau, to be able to watch.... of course this is a *very fine house*. There was a lady from the Spanish Court here in the summer; she had a liver. We often spoke together."

I looked gratified and humble.

"Now, in England, in your 'boarding 'ouse', one does not find the First Class, as in Germany."



"No, indeed," I replied, still hypnotised by the Baron, who looked like a little yellow silkworm.

"The Baron comes every year," went on the Herr Oberlehrer, "for his nerves. He has never spoken to any of the guests – yet! A smile crossed his face. I seemed to see his visions of some splendid upheaval of that silence – a dazzling exchange of courtesies in a dim future, a splendid sacrifice of a newspaper to this Exalted One, a "danke schön" to be handed down to future generations.

At that moment the postman, looking like a German army officer, came in with the mail. He threw my letters into my milk pudding, and then turned to a waitress and whispered. She retired hastily. The manager of the pension came in with a little tray. A picture post card was deposited on it, and reverently bowing his head, the manager of the pension carried it to the Baron.

Myself, I felt disappointed that there was not a salute of twenty-five guns.

At the end of the meal we were served with coffee. I noticed the Baron took three lumps of sugar, putting two in his cup and wrapping up the third in a corner of his pocket-handkerchief. He was always the first to enter the dining-room and the last to leave; and in a vacant chair beside him he placed a little black leather bag.

In the afternoon, leaning from my window, I saw him pass down the street, walking tremulously and carrying the bag. Each time he passed a lamp-post he shrank a little, as though expecting it to strike him, or maybe the sense of plebeian contamination...

I wondered where he was going, and why he carried the bag. Never had I seen him at the Casino or the Bath Establishment. He looked forlorn, his feet slipped in his sandals. I found myself pitying the Baron.

That evening a party of us were gathered in the salon discussing the day's "kur" with feverish animation. The Frau Oberregierungsrat sat by me knitting a shawl for her youngest of nine daughters, who was in that very interesting, frail condition..."But it is bound to be quite satisfactory," she said to me. "The dear married a banker – the desire of her life."

There must have been eight or ten of us gathered together, we who were married exchanging confidences as to the underclothing and peculiar characteristics of our husbands, the unmarried discussing the over-clothing and peculiar fascinations of Possible Ones.

"I knit them myself," I heard the Frau Lehrer cry, "of thick grey wool. He wears one a month, with two soft collars."



"And then," whispered Fräulein Lisa, "he said to me, 'Indeed you please me. I shall, perhaps, write to your mother.'"

Small wonder that we were a little violently excited, a little expostulatory.

Suddenly the door opened and admitted the Baron.

Followed a complete and deathlike silence.

He came in slowly, hesitated, took up a toothpick from a dish on the top of the piano, and went out again.

When the door was closed we raised a triumphant cry! It was the first time he had ever been known to enter the salon. Who could tell what the Future held?

Days lengthened into weeks. Still we were together, and still the solitary little figure, head bowed as though under the weight of the spectacles, haunted me. He entered with the black bag, he retired with the black bag – and that was all.

At last the manager of the pension told us the Baron was leaving the next day.

"Oh," I thought, "surely he cannot drift into obscurity – be lost without one word! Surely he will honour the Frau Oberregierungsrat of the Frau Feldleutnantswitwe *once* before he goes."

In the evening of that day it rained heavily. I went to the post office, and as I stood on the steps, umbrellaless, hesitating before plunging into the slushy road, a little, hesitating voice seemed to come from under my elbow.

I looked down. It was the First of the Barons with the black bag and an umbrella. Was I mad? Was I sane? He was asking me to share the latter. But I was exceedingly nice, a trifle diffident, appropriately reverential. Together we walked through the mud and slush.

Now, there is something peculiarly intimate in sharing an umbrella.

It is apt to put one on the same footing as brushing a man's coat for him – a little daring, naive.

I longed to know why he sat alone, why he carried the bag, what he did all day. But he himself volunteered some information.

"I fear," he said, "that my luggage will be damp. I invariably carry it with me in this bag – one requires so little—for servants are untrustworthy."



"A wise idea," I answered. And then: "Why have you denied us the pleasure –"

"I sit alone that I may eat more," said the Baron, peering into the dusk; "my stomach requires a great deal of food. I order double portions, and eat them in peace."

Which sounded finely Baronial.

"And what do you do all day?"

"I imbibe nourishment in my room," he replied, in a voice that closed the conversation and almost repented of the umbrella.

When we arrived at the pension there was very nearly an open riot.

I ran half way up the stairs, and thanked the Baron audibly from the landing.

He distinctly replied: "Not at all!"

It was very friendly of the Herr Oberlehrer to have sent me a bouquet that evening, and the Frau Oberregierungsrat asked me for my pattern of a baby's bonnet!

\* \* \*

Next day the Baron was gone.

Sic transit gloria German mundi.

