



THE JOURNEY TO BRUGES (1911)

By Katherine Mansfield

“You got three-quarters of an hour,” said the porter. “You got an hour mostly. Put it in the cloak-room, lady.”

A German family, their luggage neatly buttoned into what appeared to be odd canvas trouser legs, filled the entire space before the counter, and a homoeopathic young clergyman, his black dicky flapping over his shirt, stood at my elbow. We waited and waited, for the cloak-room porter could not get rid of the German family, who appeared by their enthusiasm and gestures to be explaining to him the virtue of so many buttons. At last the wife of the party seized her particular packet and started to undo it. Shrugging his shoulders, the porter turned to me. “Where for?” he asked.

“Ostend.”

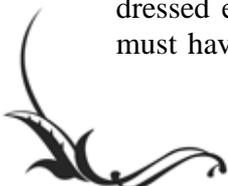
“Wot are you putting it in here for?” I said, “Because I’ve a long time to wait.”

He shouted, “Train’s in 2.20. No good bringing it here. Hi, you there, lump it off!”

My porter lumped it. The young clergyman, who had listened and remarked, smiled at me radiantly. “The train is in,” he said, “really in. You’ve only a few moments, you know.” My sensitiveness glimpsed a symbol in his eye. I ran to the book-stall. When I returned I had lost my porter. In the teasing heat I ran up and down the platform. The whole travelling world seemed to possess a porter and glory in him except me. Savage and wretched I saw them watch me with that delighted relish of the hot in the very much hotter. “One could have a fit running in weather like this,” said a stout lady, eating a farewell present of grapes. Then I was informed that the train was not yet in. I had been running up and down the Folkstone express. On a higher platform I found my porter sitting on the suit case.

“I knew you’d be doin’ that,” he said, airily. “I nearly come and stop you. I seen you from’ ere.”

I dropped into a smoking compartment with four young men, two of whom were saying good-bye to a pale youth with a cane. “Well, good-bye, old chap. It’s frightfully good of you to have come down. I knew you. I knew the same old slouch. Now, look here, when we come back we’ll have a night of it. What? Ripping of you to have come, old man.” This from an enthusiast, who lit a cigar as the train swung out, turned to his companion and said, “Frightfully nice chap, but—lord—what a bore!” His companion, who was dressed entirely in mole, even unto his socks and hair, smiled gently. I think his brain must have been the same colour: he proved so gentle and sympathetic a listener. In the



opposite corner to me sat a beautiful young Frenchman with curly hair and a watch-chain from which dangled a silver fish, a ring, a silver shoe, and a medal. He stared out of the window the whole time, faintly twitching his nose. Of the remaining member there was nothing to be seen from behind his luggage but a pair of tan shoes and a copy of *The Snark's Summer Annual*.

“Look here, old man,” said the Enthusiast, “I want to change all our places. You know those arrangements you've made—I want to cut them out altogether. Do you mind?”

“No,” said the Mole, faintly. “But why?”

“Well, I was thinking it over in bed last night, and I'm hanged if I can see the good of us paying fifteen bob if we don't want to. You see what I mean?” The Mole took off his pince-nez and breathed on them. “Now I don't want to unsettle you,” went on the Enthusiast, “because, after all, it's your party—you asked me. I wouldn't upset it for anything, but—there you are—you see—what?”

Suggested the Mole: “I'm afraid people will be down on me for taking you abroad.”

Straightway the other told him how sought after he had been. From far and near, people who were full up for the entire month of August had written and begged for him. He wrung the Mole's heart by enumerating those longing homes and vacant chairs dotted all over England, until the Mole deliberated between crying and going to sleep. He chose the latter.

They all went to sleep except the young Frenchman, who took a little pocket edition out of his coat and nursed it on his knee while he gazed at the warm, dusty country. At Shorncliffe the train stopped. Dead silence. There was nothing to be seen but a large white cemetery. Fantastic it looked in the late afternoon sun, its full-length marble angels appearing to preside over a cheerless picnic of the Shorncliffe departed on the brown field. One white butterfly flew over the railway lines. As we crept out of the station I saw a poster advertising the *Athenaeum*. The Enthusiast grunted and yawned, shook himself into existence by rattling the money in his trouser pockets. He jabbed the Mole in the ribs. “I say, we're nearly there! Can you get down those beastly golf-clubs of mine from the rack?” My heart yearned over the Mole's immediate future, but he was cheerful and offered to find me a porter at Dover, and strapped my parasol in with my rugs. We saw the sea. “It's going to be beastly rough,” said the Enthusiast, “Gives you a head, doesn't it? Look here, I know a tip for sea-sickness, and it's this: You lie on your back—flat—you know, cover your face, and eat nothing but biscuits.”

“Dover!” shouted a guard.

In the act of crossing the gangway we renounced England. The most blatant British female produced her mite of French: we “S'il vous plaît'd” one another on the deck, “Merci'd” one another on the stairs, and “Pardon'd” to our heart's content in the saloon. The stewardess stood at the foot of the stairs, a stout, forbidding female, pockmarked, her hands hidden under a businesslike-looking apron. She replied to our salutations with



studied indifference, mentally ticking off her prey. I descended to the cabin to remove my hat. One old lady was already established there.

She lay on a rose and white couch, a black shawl tucked round her, fanning herself with a black feather fan. Her grey hair was half covered with a lace cap and her face gleamed from the black drapings and rose pillows with charming old-world dignity. There was about her a faint rustling and the scents of camphor and lavender. As I watched her, thinking of Rembrandt and, for some reason, Anatole France, the stewardess bustled up, placed a canvas stool at her elbow, spread a newspaper upon it, and banged down a receptacle rather like a baking tin. ...

I went up on deck. The sea was bright green, with rolling waves. All the beauty and artificial flower of France had removed their hats and bound their heads in veils. A number of young German men, displaying their national bulk in light-coloured suits cut in the pattern of pyjamas, promenaded. French family parties—the female element in chairs, the male in graceful attitudes against the ship's side—talked already with that brilliance which denotes friction! I found a chair in a corner against a white partition, but unfortunately this partition had a window set in it for the purpose of providing endless amusement for the curious, who peered through it, watching those bold and brave spirits who walked “for'ard” and were drenched and beaten by the waves. In the first half-hour the excitement of getting wet and being pleaded with, and rushing into dangerous places to return and be rubbed down, was all-absorbing. Then it palled—the parties drifted into silence. You would catch them staring intently at the ocean—and yawning. They grew cold and snappy. Suddenly a young lady in a white woollen hood with cherry bows got up from her chair and swayed over to the railings. We watched her, vaguely sympathetic. The young man with whom she had been sitting called to her.

“Are you better?” Negative expressed.

He sat up in his chair. “Would you like me to hold your head?”

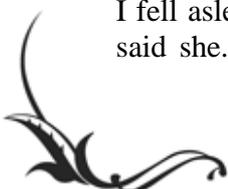
“No,” said her shoulders

“Would you care for a coat round you? ... Is it over? ... Are you going to remain there?”... He looked at her with infinite tenderness. I decided never again to call men unsympathetic, and to believe in the allconquering power of love until I died—but never put it to the test. I went down to sleep.

I lay down opposite the old lady, and watched the shadows spinning over the ceilings and the wave-drops shining on the portholes.

In the shortest sea voyage there is no sense of time. You have been down in the cabin for hours or days or years. Nobody knows or cares. You know all the people to the point of indifference. You do not believe in dry land any more—you are caught in the pendulum itself, and left there, idly swinging. The light faded.

I fell asleep, to wake to find the stewardess shaking me. “We are there in two minutes,” said she. Forlorn ladies, freed from the embrace of Neptune, knelt upon the floor and



searched for their shoes and hairpins—only the old and dignified one lay passive, fanning herself. She looked at me and smiled.

“Grâce de Dieu, c'est fini,” she quavered in a voice so fine it seemed to quaver on a thread of lace.

I lifted up my eyes. “Oui, c'est fini!”

“Vous allez à Strasbourg, Madame?”

“No,” I said. “Bruges.”

“That is a great pity,” said she, closing her fan and the conversation. I could not think why, but I had visions of myself perhaps travelling in the same railway carriage with her, wrapping her in the black shawl, of her falling in love with me and leaving me unlimited quantities of money and old lace. ... These sleepy thoughts pursued me until I arrived on deck.

The sky was indigo blue, and a great many stars were shining: our little ship stood black and sharp in the clear air. “Have you the tickets? ... Yes, they want the tickets. ... Produce your tickets!”... We were squeezed over the gangway, shepherded into the custom house, where porters heaved our luggage on to long wooden slabs, and an old man wearing horn spectacles checked it without a word. “Follow me!” shouted the villainous-looking creature whom I had endowed with my worldly goods. He leapt on to a railway line, and I leapt after him. He raced along a platform, dodging the passengers and fruit wagons, with the security of a cinematograph figure. I reserved a seat and went to buy fruit at a little stall displaying grapes and greengages. The old lady was there, leaning on the arm of a large blond man, in white, with a flowing tie. We nodded.

“Buy me,” she said in her delicate voice, “three ham sandwiches, *mon cher!*”

“And some cakes,” said he.

“Yes, and perhaps a bottle of lemonade.”

“Romance is an imp!” thought I, climbing up into the carriage. The train swung out of the station; the air, blowing through the open windows, smelled of fresh leaves. There were sudden pools of light in the darkness; when I arrived at Bruges the bells were ringing, and white and mysterious shone the moon over the Grand' Place.

