



THE MODERN SOUL (1911)

By Katherine Mansfield

"Good-evening," said the Herr Professor, squeezing my hand; "wonderful weather! I have just returned from a party in the wood. I have been making music for them on my trombone. You know, these pine-trees provide most suitable accompaniment for a trombone! They are sighing delicacy against sustained strength, as I remarked once in a lecture on wind instruments in Frankfort. May I be permitted to sit beside you on this bench, gnädige Frau?"

He sat down, tugging at a white paper package in the tail pocket of his coat.

"Cherries," he said, nodding and smiling. "There is nothing like cherries for producing free saliva after trombone playing, especially after Grieg's 'Ich Liebe Dich.' Those sustained blasts on 'liebe' make my throat as dry as a railway tunnel. Have some?" He shook the bag at me.

"I prefer watching you eat them."

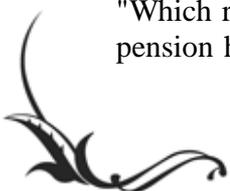
"Ah, ha!" He crossed his legs, sticking the cherry bag between his knees, to leave both hands free. "Psychologically I understood your refusal. It is your innate feminine delicacy in preferring etherealised sensations. . . . Or perhaps you do not care to eat the worms. All cherries contain worms. Once I made a very interesting experiment with a colleague of mine at the university. We bit into four pounds of the best cherries and did not find one specimen without a worm. But what would you? As I remarked to him afterwards – dear friend, it amounts to this: if one wishes to satisfy the desires of nature one must be strong enough to ignore the facts of nature. . . . The conversation is not out of your depth? I have so seldom the time or opportunity to open my heart to a woman that I am apt to forget."

I looked at him brightly.

"See what a fat one!" cried the Herr Professor. "That is almost a mouthful in itself; it is beautiful enough to hang from a watch-chain." He chewed it up and spat the stone an incredible distance – over the garden path into the flower bed. He was proud of the feat. I saw it. "The quantity of fruit I have eaten on this bench," he sighed; "apricots, peaches and cherries. One day that garden bed will become an orchard grove, and I shall allow you to pick as much as you please, without paying me anything."

I was grateful, without showing undue excitement.

"Which reminds me" – he hit the side of his nose with one finger – "the manager of the pension handed me my weekly bill after dinner this evening. It is almost impossible to



credit. I do not expect you to believe me – he has charged me extra for a miserable little glass of milk I drink in bed at night to prevent insomnia. Naturally, I did not pay. But the tragedy of the story is this: I cannot expect the milk to produce somnolence any longer; my peaceful attitude of mind towards it is completely destroyed. I know I shall throw myself into a fever in attempting to plumb this want of generosity in so wealthy a man as the manager of a pension. Think of me to-night." – he ground the empty bag under his heel – "think that the worst is happening to me as your head drops asleep on your pillow."

Two ladies came on the front steps of the pension and stood, arm in arm, looking over the garden. The one, old and scraggy, dressed almost entirely in black bead trimming and a satin reticule; the other, young and thin, in a white gown, her yellow hair tastefully garnished with mauve sweet peas.

The Professor drew in his feet and sat up sharply, pulling down his waistcoat.

"The Godowskas," he murmured. "Do you know them? A mother and daughter from Vienna. The mother has an internal complaint and the daughter is an actress. Fräulein Sonia is a very modern soul. I think you would find her most sympathetic. She is forced to be in attendance on her mother just now. But what a temperament! I have once described her in her autograph album as a tigress with a flower in the hair. Will you excuse me? Perhaps I can persuade them to be introduced to you."

I said, "I am going up to my room." But the Professor rose and shook a playful finger at me. "Na," he said, "we are friends, and, therefore, I shall speak quite frankly to you. I think they would consider it a little 'marked' if you immediately retired to the house at their approach, after sitting here alone with me in the twilight. You know this world. Yes, you know it as I do."

I shrugged my shoulders, remarking 'with one eye' that while the Professor had been talking the Godowskas had trailed across the lawn towards us. They confronted the Herr Professor as he stood up.

"Good-evening," quavered Frau Godowska. "Wonderful weather! It has given me quite a touch of hay fever!" Fräulein Godowska said nothing. She swooped over a rose growing in the embryo orchard then stretched out her hand with a magnificent gesture to the Herr Professor. He presented me.

"This is my little English friend of whom I have spoken. She is the stranger in our midst. We have been eating cherries together."

"How delightful," sighed Frau Godowska. "My daughter and I have often observed you through the bedroom window. Haven't we, Sonia?"

Sonia absorbed my outward and visible form with an inward and spiritual glance, then repeated the magnificent gesture for my benefit. The four of us sat on the bench, with that faint air of excitement of passengers established in a railway carriage on the qui vive for the train whistle. Frau Godowska sneezed. "I wonder if it is hay fever," she remarked,



worrying the satin reticule for her handkerchief, "or would it be the dew. Sonia, dear, is the dew falling?"

Fraulein Sonia raised her face to the sky, and half closed her eyes. "No, mamma, my face is quite warm. Oh, look, Herr Professor, there are swallows in flight; they are like a little flock of Japanese thoughts – nicht wahr?"

"Where?" cried the Herr Professor. "Oh yes, I see, by the kitchen chimney. But why do you say 'Japanese'? Could you not compare them with equal veracity to a little flock of German thoughts in flight?" He rounded on me. "Have you swallows in England?"

"I believe there are some at certain seasons. But doubtless they have not the same symbolical value for the English. In Germany – "

"I have never been to England," interrupted Fräulein Sonia, "but I have many English acquaintances. They are so cold!" She shivered.

"Fish-blooded," snapped Frau Godowska. "Without soul, without heart, without grace. But you cannot equal their dress materials. I spent a week in Brighton twenty years ago, and the travelling cape I bought there is not yet worn out – the one you wrap the hot-water bottle in, Sonia. My lamented husband, your father, Sonia, knew a great deal about England. But the more he knew about it the oftener he remarked to me, 'England is merely an island of beef flesh swimming in a warm gulf sea of gravy.' Such a brilliant way of putting things. Do you remember, Sonia?"

"I forget nothing, mamma," answered Sonia.

Said the Herr Professor: "That is the proof of your calling, gnädiges Fräulein. Now I wonder – and this is a very interesting speculation – is memory a blessing or – excuse the word – a curse?"

Frau Godowska looked into the distance, then the corners of her mouth dropped and her skin puckered. She began to shed tears.

"Ach Gott! Gracious lady, what have I said?" exclaimed the Herr Professor.

Sonia took her mother's hand. "Do you know," she said, "to-night it is stewed carrots and nut tart for supper. Suppose we go in and take our places," her sidelong, tragic stare accusing the Professor and me the while.

I followed them across the lawn and up the steps. Frau Godowska was murmuring, "Such a wonderful, beloved man"; with her disengaged hand Fräulein Sonia was arranging the sweet-pea "garniture."

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"A concert for the benefit of afflicted Catholic infants will take place in the salon at eight-thirty P.M. Artists: Fräulein Sonia Godowska, from Vienna; Herr Professor Windberg and his trombone; Frau Oberlehrer Weidel, and others."

This notice was tied round the neck of the melancholy stag's head in the dining-room. It graced him like a red and white dinner bib for days before the event, causing the Herr Professor to bow before it and say "good appetite" until we sickened of his pleasantry and left the smiling to be done by the waiter, who was paid to be pleasing to the guests.

On the appointed day the married ladies sailed about the pension dressed like upholstered chairs, and the unmarried ladies like draped muslin dressing-table covers. Frau Godowska pinned a rose in the centre of her reticule; another blossom was tucked in the mazy folds of a white antimacassar thrown across her breast. The gentlemen wore black coats, white silk ties and ferny buttonholes tickling the chin.

The floor of the salon was freshly polished, chairs and benches arranged, and a row of little flags strung across the ceiling – they flew and jiggled in the draught with all the enthusiasm of family washing. It was arranged that I should sit beside Frau Godowska, and that the Herr Professor and Sonia should join us when their share of the concert was over.

"That will make you feel quite one of the performers," said the Herr Professor genially. "It is a great pity that the English nation is so unmusical. Never mind! To-night you shall hear something – we have discovered a nest of talent during the rehearsals."

"What do you intend to recite, Fraulein Sonia?"

She shook back her hair. "I never know until the last moment. When I come on the stage I wait for one moment and then I have the sensation as though something struck me here," – she placed her hand upon her collar brooch – "and . . . words come!"

"Bend down a moment," whispered her mother. "Sonia, love, your skirt safety-pin is showing at the back. Shall I come outside and fasten it properly for you, or will you do it yourself?"

"Oh, mamma, please don't say such things," Sonia flushed and grew very angry. "You know how sensitive I am to the slightest unsympathetic impression at a time like this. . . . I would rather my skirt dropped off my body – "

"Sonia – my heart!"

A bell tinkled.

The waiter came in and opened the piano. In the heated excitement of the moment he entirely forgot what was fitting, and flicked the keys with the grimy table napkin he carried over his arm. The Frau Oberlehrer tripped on the platform followed by a very young gentleman, who blew his nose twice before he hurled his handkerchief into the bosom of the piano.



"Yes, I know you have no love for me,
And no forget-me-not.
No love, no heart, and no forget-me-not."

sang the Frau Oberlehrer, in a voice that seemed to issue from her forgotten thimble and have nothing to do with her.

"Ach, how sweet, how delicate," we cried, clapping her soothingly. She bowed as though to say, "Yes, isn't it?" and retired, the very young gentleman dodging her train and scowling.

The piano was closed, an arm-chair was placed in the centre of the platform. Fraulein Sonia drifted towards it. A breathless pause. Then, presumably, the winged shaft struck her collar brooch. She implored us not to go into the woods in trained dresses, but rather as lightly draped as possible, and bed with her among the pine needles. Her loud, slightly harsh voice filled the salon. She dropped her arms over the back of the chair, moving her lean hands from the wrists. We were thrilled and silent. The Herr Professor, beside me, abnormally serious, his eyes bulging, pulled at his moustache ends. Frau Godowska adopted that peculiarly detached attitude of the proud parent. The only soul who remained untouched by her appeal was the waiter, who leaned idly against the wall of the salon and cleaned his nails with the edge of a programme. He was "off duty" and intended to show it.

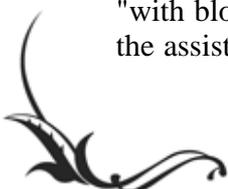
"What did I say?" shouted the Herr Professor under cover of tumultuous applause, "temper-ament! There you have it. She is a flame in the heart of a lily. I know I am going to play well. It is my turn now. I am inspired. Fräulein Sonia" – as that lady returned to us, pale and draped in a large shawl – "you are my inspiration. To-night you shall be the soul of my trombone. Wait only."

To right and left of us people bent over and whispered admiration down Fräulein Sonia's neck. She bowed in the grand style.

"I am always successful," she said to me. "You see, when I act I *am*. In Vienna, in the plays of Ibsen we had so many bouquets that the cook had three in the kitchen. But it is difficult here. There is so little magic. Do you not feel it? There is none of that mysterious perfume which floats almost as a visible thing from the souls of the Viennese audiences. My spirit starves for want of that." She leaned forward, chin on hand. "Starves," she repeated.

The Professor appeared with his trombone, blew into it, held it up to one eye, tucked back his shirt cuffs and wallowed in the soul of Sonia Godowska. Such a sensation did he create that he was recalled to play a Bavarian dance, which he acknowledged was to be taken as a breathing exercise rather than an artistic achievement. Frau Godowska kept time to it with a fan.

Followed the very young gentleman who piped in a tenor voice that he loved somebody, "with blood in his heart and a thousand pains." Fraulein Sonia acted a poison scene with the assistance of her mother's pill vial and the arm-chair replaced by a "chaise longue"; a



young girl scratched a lullaby on a young fiddle; and the Herr Professor performed the last sacrificial rites on the altar of the afflicted children by playing the National Anthem.

"Now I must put mamma to bed," whispered Fraulein Sonia. "But afterwards I must take a walk. It is imperative that I free my spirit in the open air for a moment. Would you come with me as far as the railway station and back?"

"Very well, then, knock on my door when you're ready."

Thus the modern soul and I found ourselves together under the stars.

"What a night!" she said. "Do you know that poem of Sappho about her hands in the stars . . . I am curiously sapphic. And this is so remarkable – not only am I sapphic, I find in all the works of all the greatest writers, especially in their unedited letters, some touch, some sign of myself – some resemblance, some part of myself, like a thousand reflections of my own hands in a dark mirror."

"But what a bother," said I.

"I do not know what you mean by 'bother'; is it rather the curse of my genius . . ." She paused suddenly, staring at me. "Do you know my tragedy?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"My tragedy is my mother. Living with her I live with the coffin of my unborn aspirations. You heard that about the safety-pin to-night. It may seem to you a little thing, but it ruined my three first gestures. They were –"

"Impaled on a safety-pin," I suggested.

"Yes, exactly that. And when we are in Vienna I am the victim of moods, you know. I long to do wild, passionate things. And mamma says, 'Please pour out my mixture first.' Once I remember I flew into a rage and threw a washstand jug out of the window. Do you know what she said? 'Sonia, it is not so much throwing things out of windows, if only you would –'"

"Choose something smaller?" said I.

"No... 'tell me about it beforehand.' Humiliating! And I do not see any possible light out of this darkness."

"Why don't you join a touring company and leave your mother in Vienna?"

"What! Leave my poor, little, sick, widowed mother in Vienna! Sooner than that I would drown myself. I love my mother as I love nobody else in the world – nobody and nothing! Do you think it is impossible to love one's tragedy? 'Out of my great sorrows I make my little songs,' that is Heine or myself."



"Oh, well, that's all right," I said cheerfully.

"But it is not all right!"

I suggested we should turn back. We turned.

"Sometimes I think the solution lies in marriage," said Fraulein Sonia. "If I find a simple, peaceful man who adores me and will look after mamma – a man who would be for me a pillow – for genius cannot hope to mate – I shall marry him. . . . You know the Herr Professor has paid me very marked attentions."

"Oh, Fräulein Sonia," I said, very pleased with myself, "why not marry him to your mother?" We were passing the hairdresser's shop at the moment. Fräulein Sonia clutched my arm.

"You, you," she stammered. "The cruelty. I am going to faint. Mamma to marry again before I marry – the indignity. I am going to faint here and now."

I was frightened. "You can't," I said, shaking her.

"Come back to the pension and faint as much as you please. But you can't faint here. All the shops are closed. There is nobody about. Please don't be so foolish."

"Here and here only!" She indicated the exact spot and dropped quite beautifully, lying motionless.

"Very well," I said, "faint away; but please hurry over it."

She did not move. I began to walk home, but each time I looked behind me I saw the dark form of the modern soul prone before the hairdresser's window. Finally I ran, and rooted out the Herr Professor from his room. "Fraulein Sonia has fainted," I said crossly.

"Du lieber Gott! Where? How?"

"Outside the hairdresser's shop in the Station Road."

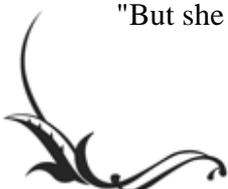
"Jesus and Maria! Has she no water with her?" – he seized his carafe – nobody beside her?"

"Nothing."

"Where is my coat? No matter, I shall catch a cold on the chest. Willingly, I shall catch one...You are ready to come with me?"

"No," I said; "you can take the waiter."

"But she must have a woman. I cannot be so indelicate as to attempt to loosen her stays."



"Modern souls oughtn't to wear them," said I. He pushed past me and clattered down the stairs.

* * *

When I came down to breakfast next morning there were two places vacant at table. Fräulein Sonia and Herr Professor had gone off for a day's excursion in the woods.

I wondered.

