



## THE SISTER OF THE BARONESS (1910)

By Katherine Mansfield

"There are two new guests arriving this afternoon," said the manager of the pension, placing a chair for me at the breakfast table. "I have only received the letter acquainting me with the fact this morning. The Baroness von Gall is sending her little daughter – the poor child is dumb – to make the 'cure.' She is to stay with us a month, and then the Baroness herself is coming."

"Baroness von Gall," cried the Frau Doktor, coming into the room and positively scenting the name. "Coming here? There was a picture of her only last week in *Sport and Salon*. She is a friend of the court: I have heard that the Kaiserin says 'du' to her. But this is delightful! I shall take my doctor's advice and spend an extra six weeks here. There is nothing like young society."

"But the child is dumb," ventured the manager apologetically.

"Bah! What does that matter? Afflicted children have such pretty ways."

Each guest who came into the breakfast-room was bombarded with the wonderful news. "The Baroness von Gall is sending her little daughter here; the Baroness herself is coming in a month's time." Coffee and rolls took on the nature of an orgy. We positively scintillated. Anecdotes of the High Born were poured out, sweetened and sipped: we gorged on scandals of High Birth generously buttered.

"They are to have the room next to yours," said the manager, addressing me. "I was wondering if you would permit me to take down the portrait of the Kaiserin Elizabeth from above your bed to hang over their sofa."

"Yes, indeed, something homelike" – the Frau Oberregierungsrat patted my hand – "and of no possible significance to you."

I felt a little crushed. Not at the prospect of losing that vision of diamonds and blue velvet bust, but at the tone – placing me outside the pale – branding me as a foreigner.

We dissipated the day in valid speculations. Decided it was too warm to walk in the afternoon, so lay down on our beds, mustering in great force for afternoon coffee. And a carriage drew up at the door. A tall young girl got out, leading a child by the hand. They entered the hall, were greeted and shown to their room. Ten minutes later she came down with the child to sign the visitors' book. She wore a black, closely fitting dress, touched at



throat and wrists with white frilling. Her brown hair, braided, was tied with a black bow – unusually pale, with a small mole on her left cheek.

"I am the Baroness von Gall's sister," she said, trying the pen on a piece of blotting-paper, and smiling at us deprecatingly. Even for the most jaded of us life holds its thrilling moments. Two Baronesses in two months! The manager immediately left the room to find a new nib.

To my plebeian eyes that afflicted child was singularly unattractive. She had the air of having been perpetually washed with a blue bag, and hair like grey wool – dressed, too, in a pinafore so stiffly starched that she could only peer at us over the frill of it – a social barrier of a pinafore – and perhaps it was too much to expect a noble aunt to attend to the menial consideration of her niece's ears. But a dumb niece with unwashed ears struck me as a most depressing object.

They were given places at the head of the table. For a moment we all looked at one another with an eena-deena-dina-do expression. Then the Frau Oberregierungsrat:

"I hope you are not tired after your journey."

"No," said the sister of the Baroness, smiling into her cup.

"I hope the dear child is not tired," said the Frau Doktor.

"Not at all."

"I expect, I hope you will sleep well to-night," the Herr Oberlehrer said reverently.

"Yes."

The poet from Munich never took his eyes off the pair. He allowed his tie to absorb most of his coffee while he gazed at them exceedingly soulfully.

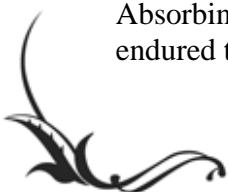
Unyoking Pegasus, thought I. Death spasms of his Odes to Solitude! There were possibilities in that young woman for an inspiration, not to mention a dedication, and from that moment his suffering temperament took up its bed and walked.

They retired after the meal, leaving us to discuss them at leisure.

"There is a likeness," mused the Frau Doktor. "Quite. What a manner she has. Such reserve, such a tender way with the child."

"Pity she has the child to attend to," exclaimed the student from Bonn. He had hitherto relied upon three scars and a ribbon to produce an effect, but the sister of a Baroness demanded more than these.

Absorbing days followed. Had she been one whit less beautifully born we could not have endured the continual conversation about her, the songs in her praise, the detailed account



of her movements. But she graciously suffered our worship and we were more than content.

The poet she took into her confidence. He carried her books when we went walking, he jumped the afflicted one on his knee – poetic licence, this – and one morning brought his notebook into the salon and read to us.

"The sister of the Baroness has assured me she is going into a convent," he said. (That made the student from Bonn sit up.) "I have written these few lines last night from my window in the sweet night air – "

"Oh, your *delicate* chest," commented the Frau Doktor.

He fixed a stony eye on her, and she blushed.

"I have written these lines:

"Ah, will you to a convent fly,  
So young, so fresh, so fair?  
Spring like a doe upon the fields  
And find your beauty there."

Nine verses equally lovely commanded her to equally violent action. I am certain that had she followed his advice not even the remainder of her life in a convent would have given her time to recover her breath.

"I have presented her with a copy," he said. "And to-day we are going to look for wild flowers in the wood."

The student from Bonn got up and left the room. I begged the poet to repeat the verses once more. At the end of the sixth verse I saw from the window the sister of the Baroness and the scarred youth disappearing through the front gate, which enabled me to thank the poet so charmingly that he offered to write me out a copy.

But we were living at too high pressure in those days. Swinging from our humble pension to the high walls of palaces, how could we help but fall? Late one afternoon the Frau Doktor came upon me in the writing-room and took me to her bosom.

"She has been telling me all about her life," whispered the Frau Doktor. "She came to my bedroom and offered to massage my arm. You know, I am the greatest martyr to rheumatism. And, fancy now, she has already had six proposals of marriage. Such beautiful offers that I assure you I wept – and every one of noble birth. My dear, the most beautiful was in the wood. Not that I do not think a proposal should take place in a drawing-room – it is more fitting to have four walls – but this was a private wood. He said, the young officer, she was like a young tree whose branches had never been touched by the ruthless hand of man. Such delicacy!" She sighed and turned up her eyes.



"Of course it is difficult for you English to understand when you are always exposing your legs on cricket-fields, and breeding dogs in your back gardens. The pity of it! Youth should be like a wild rose. For myself I do not understand how your women ever get married at all."

She shook her head so violently that I shook mine too, and a gloom settled round my heart. It seemed we were really in a very bad way. Did the spirit of romance spread her rose wings only over aristocratic Germany?

I went to my room, bound a pink scarf about my hair, and took a volume of Mörike's lyrics into the garden. A great bush of purple lilac grew behind the summer-house. There I sat down, finding a sad significance in the delicate suggestion of half mourning. I began to write a poem myself.

"They sway and languish dreamily,  
And we, close pressed, are kissing there."

It ended! "Close pressed" did not sound at all fascinating. Savoured of wardrobes. Did my wild rose then already trail in the dust? I chewed a leaf and hugged my knees. Then – magic moment – I heard voices from the summer-house, the sister of the Baroness and the student from Bonn.

Second-hand was better than nothing; I pricked up my ears.

"What small hands you have," said the student from Bonn. "They are like white lilies lying in the pool of your black dress." This certainly sounded the real thing. Her high-born reply was what interested me. Sympathetic murmur only.

"May I hold one?"

I heard two sighs – presumed they held – he had rifled those dark waters of a noble blossom.

"Look at my great fingers beside yours."

"But they are beautifully kept," said the sister of the Baroness shyly.

The minx! Was love then a question of manicure?

"How I should adore to kiss you," murmured the student. "But you know I am suffering from severe nasal catarrh, and I dare not risk giving it to you. Sixteen times last night did I count myself sneezing. And three different handkerchiefs."

I threw Mörike into the lilac bush, and went back to the house. A great automobile snorted at the front door. In the salon great commotion. The Baroness was paying a surprise visit to her little daughter. Clad in a yellow mackintosh she stood in the middle of the room questioning the manager. And every guest the pension contained was



grouped about her, even the Frau Doktor, presumably examining a timetable, as near to the august skirts as possible.

"But where is my maid?" asked the Baroness.

"There was no maid," replied the manager, "save for your gracious sister and daughter."

"Sister!" she cried sharply. "Fool, I have no sister. My child travelled with the daughter of my dressmaker."

Tableau grandissimo!

