



THE WRONG HOUSE (1920)

By Katherine Mansfield

“Two purl—two plain—wool in front of the needle—and knit two together.” Like an old song, like a song that she had sung so often that only to breathe was to sing it, she murmured the knitting pattern. Another vest was nearly finished for the mission parcel.

“It’s your vests, Mrs. Bean, that are so acceptable. Look at these poor little mites without a shred!” And the churchwoman showed her a photograph of repulsive little black objects with bellies shaped like lemons...

“Two purl—two plain.” Down dropped the knitting on to her lap; she gave a great long sigh, stared in front of her for a moment and then picked the knitting up and began again. What did she think about when she sighed like that? Nothing. It was a habit. She was always sighing. On the stairs, particularly, as she went up and down, she stopped, holding her dress up with one hand, the other hand on the bannister, staring at the steps—sighing.

“Wool in front of the needle ...” She sat at the dining-room window facing the street. It was a bitter autumn day; the wind ran in the street like a thin dog; the houses opposite looked as though they had been cut out with a pair of ugly steel scissors and pasted on to the grey paper sky. There was not a soul to be seen.

“Knit two together!” The clock struck three. Only three? It seemed dusk already; dusk came floating into the room, heavy, powdery dusk settling on the furniture, filming over the mirror. Now the kitchen clock struck three—two minutes late—for *this* was the clock to go by and *not* the kitchen clock. She was alone in the house. Dollicas was out shopping; she had been gone since a quarter to two. Really, she got slower and slower! What did she *do* with the time? One cannot spend more than a certain time buying a chicken ... And oh, that habit of hers of dropping the stove-rings when she made up the fire! And she set her lips, as she had set her lips for the past thirty-five years, at that habit of Dollicas’.

There came a faint noise from the street, a noise of horses’ hooves. She leaned further out to see. Good gracious! It was a funeral. First the glass coach, rolling along briskly with the gleaming, varnished coffin inside (but no wreaths), with three men in front and two standing at the back, then some carriages, some with black horses, some with brown. The dust came bowling up the road, half hiding the procession. She scanned the houses opposite to see which had the blinds down. What horrible looking men, too! laughing and joking. One leaned over to one side and blew his nose with his black glove—horrible! She gathered up the knitting, hiding her hands in it. Dollicas surely would have known ... There, they were passing ... It was the other end ...



What was this? What was happening? What could it mean? Help, God! Her old heart leaped like a fish and then fell as the glass coach drew up outside her door, as the outside men scrambled down from the front, swung off the back, and the tallest of them, with a glance of surprise at the windows, came quickly, stealthily, up the garden path.

“No!” she groaned. But yes, the blow fell, and for the moment it struck her down. She gasped, a great cold shiver went through her, and stayed in her hands and knees. She saw the man withdraw a step and again—that puzzled glance at the blinds—then—

“No!” she groaned, and stumbling, catching hold of things, she managed to get to the door before the blow fell again. She opened it, her chin trembled, her teeth clacked; somehow or other she brought out, “The wrong house!”

Oh! he was shocked. As she stepped back she saw behind him the black hats clustered at the gate. “The wrong’ ouse!” he muttered. She could only nod. She was shutting the door again when he fished out of the tail of his coat a black, brass-bound notebook and swiftly opened it. “No. 20 Shuttleworth Crescent?”

“S—street! Crescent round the corner.” Her hand lifted to point, but shook and fell.

He was taking off his hat as she shut the door and leaned against it, whimpering in the dusky hall, “Go away! Go away!”

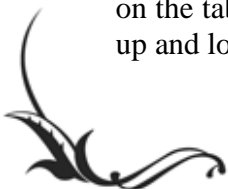
Clockety-clock-clock. Cluk! Cluk! Clockety-clock-cluk! sounded from outside, and then a faint *Cluk! Cluk!* and then silence. They were gone. They were out of sight. But still she stayed leaning against the door, staring into the hall, staring at the hall-stand that was like a great lobster with hat-pegs for feelers. But she thought of nothing; she did not even think of what had happened. It was as if she had fallen into a cave whose walls were darkness ...

She came to herself with a deep inward shock, hearing the gate bang and quick, short steps crunching the gravel; it was Dollicas hurrying round to the back door. Dollicas must not find her there; and wavering, wavering like a candle-flame, back she went into the dining-room to her seat by the window.

Dollicas was in the kitchen. *Klang!* went one of the iron rings into the fender. Then her voice, “I’m just putting on the teakettle’m.” Since they had been alone she had got into the way of shouting from one room to another. The old woman coughed to steady herself. “Please bring in the lamp,” she cried.

“The lamp!” Dollicas came across the passage and stood in the doorway. “Why, it’s only just on four’ m.”

“Never mind,” said Mrs. Bean dully. “Bring it in!” And a moment later the elderly maid appeared, carrying the gentle lamp in both hands. Her broad soft face had the look it always had when she carried anything, as though she walked in her sleep. She set it down on the table, lowered the wick, raised it, and then lowered it again. Then she straightened up and looked across at her mistress.



“Why, ‘m, whatever's that you're treading on?”

It was the mission vest.

“T't! T't!” As Dollicas picked it up she thought, “The old lady has been asleep. She's not awake yet.” Indeed the old lady looked glazed and dazed, and when she took up the knitting she drew out a needle of stitches and began to unwind what she had done.

“Don't forget the mace,” she said. Her voice sounded thin and dry. She was thinking of the chicken for that night's supper. And Dollicas understood and answered, “It's a lovely young bird!” as she pulled down the blind before going back to her kitchen ...

