

Katherine Mansfield Society

Online Creative Works Series

Short Story

Jan Kemp

‘La Croix Rouge’

La Croix Rouge

It had been the night of the full moon. Both had turned and tossed. The shutters he'd wanted not quite shut so that the light would wake him had woken her. He lay on his back, snoring. She called his name. Don't tell me not to snore. Just call my name. She'd remembered to count the days. Twenty-six. It could be less, this time, because of the travelling. She was so hot. She touched herself, lightly, wanting him.

The morning light woke her. She wrote a letter to her sister and put the letter in a pastry thin square blue airmail envelope to post on the way to the market. Then he woke up.

He dressed. He pulled her to him, standing. They hugged and swayed forward and back. This time, she pulled him back to the bed. Why do we rush so, he asked, already in her. The touching moved into their eyes.

* * *

He wore the black and purple packsac over his short warm jacket. She wore her quilted pink silk one. They stepped over the dogshit. Why are the streets full of dog piss and shit, he grumbled. The sunlight fell on the side of the street they climbed up.

In the silk weaver's house they talked about warp and woof and weft. The shuttles lay idle in their bright colours half-way through their beautifully intricate tasks. The industrial revolution had happened before the weaver's eyes. The colours were garish, the ties wide or the designs only for the church. The two bought nothing. A weaver wove some more centimetres on a black and white silk picture on a loom for the party of school-children and teachers. It was of a maiden led over river stones by a man with a tuft wearing a three-cornered hat. *Napoleon's grandson!* he whispered. *Look how finely her face is drawn.*

It was cold in the street. Walk in the sun. She was glad he must now be feeling warm enough. Her bright pink leather ankle boots raced her along the pavements slightly ahead of him. They inspected the vegetables. Too spotty. The tomatoes too squelchy. He priced the goat's cheeses. *We'll wait*, she said, *till we're at the main part*. Then she stopped and bought fennel and a red pepper, four potatoes and two endives. He took a photo of her there. You can put it all in the rucksack. He turned his back to her. She unzipped his packsac and loaded in the two full cloth bags. I'm cold. I didn't wear enough. She was glad it wasn't him. Already a week in bed, their first week, with fever. Coughing. Her going alone up the hill to the farmer's market. Creeping back in to the studio so as not to wake him if he were asleep. *Hi! Hi. Any better? Not much.*

They sat in a café. Two espressos. *Shall I wear your other Tshirt under my jacket, as you've got your thick one on?* A quick change in a cubicle. Even so, it was still cold outside. *Eight degrees in the sun maybe*, he said. On. On. *But its the olive man and the cheese man at the end who're best*. On, on. Past rosemary and dried thyme. The madman isn't here today singing a French song. *Shall we have a croissant?* Great yellowy, billowy ones from the bakery in the row of shops behind the stalls. On, on. His dark head and the short green jacket bobbing along in the crowd behind her. She stopped and turned back and checked now and then. Keeping him in view. *Fromage du chevre frais 4.50. Deux.* She waited. The cheeseman was by himself serving many customers. Despite his longsleeved Tshirt, the cold bit into her too, through the light silk jacket. Why hadn't she worn her parka too?

I'm going to go back into the sun. But I want to get the bread now. Cold. Her toes biting together in the bright pink boots. The leather was too thin for this temperature. *I'll go back down the sunny side. I'll meet you at the end.* He'd gone. She went. Fast. She walked fast. Will he walk as fast on the oppoiste side? Through the laden women. He'll be walking past all the crummy clothes stalls on the other side. In the sun at least. Parallel. He'll warm up. She'd hate him to get chilled again. If she walked fast she wouldn't. The herbs lady. The fish lady. The other cheese man where they'd bought the Roquefort. Past mandarins, oranges, banana stalls, the handicapped man handing out leaflets, a side street, the pink trout stall where she'd asked: *On fait cuire dans l'eau ou dans l'huile, s'il vous plaît? I cook it in water or oil?* Still on the shady side of the street with splashes of sun now and then. Was he warm? Did he feel the missing layer he'd given her? Was he walking as fast?

At last, the bread stall. *Au noix, oui. Nut-bread, yes.* She crossed the street and stood in the

sun. It was on the corner near the café. The girl with the miniature goats in a cage was still there, and the man, offering bonbons. *Madame, bonbons gratuits. Bonbons. Gratuit.* Free sweets. How I hate refined sugar. Don't look at her eyes. She looked up the sunny side between the stalls, the crimplene skirts and trousers hanging over the stall-keeper's heads, draped over the stalls. No green jacket, dark head.

Opposite, a Muslim in a cap stood begging. Little Mediterranean men with lined brown faces sat outside the café on chairs, smoking. Near the Muslim, the stall sold acrylic blankets and sofa seats. The sun fell down on her. She was warm. She put her sunglasses back on.

Madame, bonbons. Gratuit. Insistent. If she said Non, merci there'd be more insistence. And then there'd be something dreadful with the little goats. Why were they in a cage? Where was he?

She went to the roadway and looked up the long row of stalls, vans and cars parked, scaffolding and the backs of the plastic awnings that gave on to the pavement. The market was as authentic as the guide book had said. A real farmer's market. *La Croix Rouge.* Colourful, noisy, busy. Both sides of a long street on the ridge of a hill, with the sun on this side. But he, where where? She crossed the side street and stood on the step of the acrylic blanket truck, holding her two cloth bags, refilled again with mushrooms on top so as not to crush them, the cheeses, the clementines, the basil the bread. Where was he? The sun fell on her face. Her toes warmed in the boots. The madame with the goats insisted. *Bonbons, Madame! Gratuit, gratuit.*

* * *

My love! Come back! Where are you? Her tears fell under her sunglasses down her face. She paced forward and back, craning up and down the street crying openly now, softly but aloud in her high-pitched voice: *My love, where are you? Come back!* If only they'd said, we'll meet at the café. But her toes had been cold. He'd coughed. He'd said, I've had enough on this side, I must walk in the sun. And he'd been so sick, just before. And she'd said, I want to get the bread, I'll meet you at the other end and they'd both walked off, away from the other, he across the road and she on back down through the fruit and vegetable stalls. I'll meet you at the other end, but where? where? Did he know she'd meant the bread end? Which end did he mean? By the café? They'd neither stayed long enough to say.

And now she paced up and down, a little German woman on her honeymoon, the tears streaming, the cries coming out of her like a child. She didn't care. I'm panicking, she told herself, but couldn't stop it. I've got the rest of the francs and the studio key and he can't get in and he can't sit at the café and order another coffee and wait because I've got all the francs. He'll catch cold and why didn't we say? She paced up and down and the bonbon woman gave up pestering her. And the French people stared as she paced up and down with her German environmentally-friendly cloth bags full of marketing, in her bright pink boots, the tears streaming and her head running only with holding him, his neat light shape in her arms, his warm skin on her neck, his dark head.

* * *

He must have gone back. He must have walked faster though she'd never have thought it, at the fast pace she'd walked. She was on the shady side. And death must be like this when he'd die and she'd be facing, the tears coming out of her, spilling like this, that he'd gone, not willingly, but just taken from her out of daylight. And that was what she'd thought and he'd thought when he'd had the fever. That when they were old, and their marriage was old, they'd become even more like two voices floating into the dark of a bedroom. First one, then the other would be silent and the other would fold into itself and listen for what had once been there to comfort it, until it could accept only the silence that helped it listen and calmed it.

She walked on and on between the last of the stalls and between the uncut plane trees with their hundreds of gnarled yet new sproutings, knuckles with two many new fingers. A Metro station's steps spewed up from the ground. On, on, down the end of the street, still saying *Meine Liebe* and sobbing, not caring if the French stared. She turned right down the rue Montée and over the dogshit and dried-out piss down the steep street past the parked cars and the Frenchman on the other side going up who was calling out: *Qu'est ce que c'est que ca?* She couldn't speak to explain what it is that it is anyway, she was so choked up and maybe he was already back at the studio in the residence, waiting for her to bring the key and the rest of the shopping, waiting outside in the sun and the cold wind.

Meine Liebe! The Frenchman poised on the residence wall with his painting poised before him looked up. No, Not him. Not there. Not round the corner. Not on a bench in the garden beneath the wall near the forsythia and cherry and flowering hawthorn blooming on this ridge

overlooking the wide ice-green Rhône. She unlocked the door that said *Tirez* and the second door that said *Poussez* next to the little white button and the second plaque that said *Tirez* on the handle and was surprised to see the receptionist there, as it was already a quarter past twelve. She lifted the two cloth bags up onto the high counter, past her breasts, clutching at the key, the crying still coming out and said sobbing, *J'ai perdu mon mari au marché! Mais, Madame, ce n'est pas grave!* The receptionist said it twice, astonished. Concerned. *Le marché la-bas? Oui.* The blonde woman rushed out again, leaving the marketing on the reception sill. She rushed sobbing down the long facade of the residence and over its flagstones and the floodlight under a grating which added to the lumière effect at night, knowing she was panicking, yet unable to stop and ran again up the steep street a little and then she saw him, the bobbing dark head, packsac, green jacket and stopped, sobbing, and leaned against the stone wall in the sunlight and he came down and took her hand and said, *Bitte hör auf, please stop* and lead her back down, saying it again, and she took his hand and went with him and unlocked the two doors with the key and he picked up the cloth bags of marketing and collected the proffered messages that had come for them from the receptionist and he thanked her politely and they went upstairs to their studio room in the *ascenseur*.

* * *

She went into the bathroom and came back. *Well, that was partly why. The moon was full. You mustn't panic,* he said. *I panicked, I couldn't help it. I'm a bit mad. No,* he said, *no.* His arms were warm around her. *I won't just leave you, just like that,* he said. *Unless you give me cause to leave you and you won't. And if I left it wouldn't be like that. I'd explain and you'd know.* And she: *I didn't want you to get sick again. You know I had the key and the leftover francs.* He: *I'd have waited in the sun in the garden. Till you came. We weren't far from home. Just up a hill I don't want to go through whose fault if either's it was. That's pointless.* She: *I told the receptionist I'd lost my husband at the market, and then her eyes brightened. 'But it's not a grave matter Madame,' she said. No,* he said. *It isn't. Here I am.*

* * *

Jan Kemp, Kronberg im Taunus, Germany