A MARRIED MAN'S STORY

If one really does try to find out why it is that people don't leave each other, one discovers a mystery. It is because they can't; they are bound. And nobody on earth knows what are the bonds that bind them except those two.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD

English Chekhov

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THE BARON

"WHO is he?" I said. "And why does he sit always alone, with his back to us, too?"

"Ah!" whispered the Frau Oberregierungsrat, "he is a *Baron*."

She looked at me very solemnly, and yet with the slightest possible contempt—a "fancy-not-recognising-that-at-the-first-glance" expression.

"But, poor soul, he cannot help it," I said. "Surely that unfortunate fact ought not to debar him from the pleasures of intellectual intercourse."

If it had not been for her fork I think she would have crossed herself.

"Surely you cannot understand. He is one of the First Barons."

More than a little unnerved, she turned and spoke to the Frau Doktor on her left.

"My omelette is empty—*empty*," she protested, "and this is the third I have tried!"

I looked at the First of the Barons. He was eating salad—taking a whole lettuce leaf on his fork and absorbing it slowly, rabbit-wise—a fascinating process to watch.

Small and slight, with scanty black hair and beard and yellow-toned complexion, he invariably wore black serge clothes, a rough linen shirt, black sandals, and the largest black-rimmed spectacles that I had ever seen.

The Herr Oberlehrer, who sat opposite me, smiled benignantly.

"It must be very interesting for you, gnädige Frau, to be able to watch... of course this is a *very fine house*. There was a lady from the Spanish Court here in the summer; she had a liver. We often spoke together."

I looked gratified and humble.

"Now, in England, in your 'boarding-'ouse', one does not find the First Class, as in Germany."

"No, indeed," I replied, still hypnotised by the Baron, who looked like a little yellow silkworm.

"The Baron comes every year," went on the Herr Oberlehrer, "for his nerves. He has never spoken to any of the guests—*yet*." A smile crossed his face. I seemed to see his visions of some splendid upheaval of that silence—a dazzling exchange of courtesies in a dim future, a splendid sacrifice of a newspaper to this Exalted One, a "danke schön" to be handed down to future generations.

At that moment the postman, looking like a German army officer, came in with the mail. He threw my letters into my milk pudding, and then turned to a waitress and whispered. She retired hastily. The manager of the pension came in with a little tray. A picture postcard was deposited on it, and reverently bowing his head, the manager of the pension carried it to the Baron.

Myself, I felt disappointed that there was not a salute of twenty-five guns.

At the end of the meal we were served with coffee. I noticed the Baron took three lumps of sugar, putting two in his cup and wrapping up the third in a corner of his pocket-handkerchief. He was always the first to enter the dining-room and the last to leave; and in a vacant chair beside him he placed a little black leather bag.

In the afternoon, leaning from my window, I saw him pass down the street, walking tremulously and carrying the bag. Each time he passed a lamp-post he shrank a little, as though expecting it to strike him, or maybe the sense of plebeian contamination. . .

I wondered where he was going, and why he carried the bag. Never had I seen him at the Casino or the Bath Establishment. He looked forlorn, his feet slipped in his sandals. I found myself pitying the Baron.

That evening a party of us were gathered in the salon discussing the day's "kur" with feverish animation. The Frau Oberregierungsrat sat by me knitting a shawl for her youngest of nine daughters, who was in that very interesting, frail condition. . . "But it is bound to be quite satisfactory," she said to me. "The dear married a banker—the desire of her life."

There must have been eight or ten of us gathered together, we who were married exchanging confidences as to the underclothing and peculiar characteristics of our husbands, the unmarried discussing the over-clothing and peculiar fascinations of Possible Ones.

"I knit them myself," I heard the Frau Lehrer cry, "of thick grey wool. He wears one a month, with two soft collars."

"And then," whispered Fräulein Lisa, "he said to me, 'Indeed you please me. I shall, perhaps, write to your mother.'"

Small wonder that we were a little violently excited, a little expostulatory.

Suddenly the door opened and admitted the Baron.

Followed a complete and deathlike silence.

He came in slowly, hesitated, took up a toothpick from a dish on the top of the piano, and went out again.

When the door was closed we raised a triumphant cry! It was the first time he had ever been known to enter the salon. Who could tell

what the Future held?

Days lengthened into weeks. Still we were together, and still the solitary little figure, head bowed as though under the weight of the spectacles, haunted me. He entered with the black bag, he retired with the black bag—and that was all.

At last the manager of the pension told us the Baron was leaving the next day.

"Oh," I thought, "surely he cannot drift into obscurity—be lost without one word! Surely he will honour the Frau Oberregierungsrat of the Frau Feldleutnantswitwe *once* before he goes."

In the evening of that day it rained heavily. I went to the post office, and as I stood on the steps, umbrellaless, hesitating before plunging into the slushy road, a little, hesitating voice seemed to come from under my elbow.

I looked down. It was the First of the Barons with the black bag and an umbrella. Was I mad? Was I sane? He was asking me to share the latter. But I was exceedingly nice, a trifle diffident, appropriately reverential. Together we walked through the mud and slush.

Now, there is something peculiarly intimate in sharing an umbrella.

It is apt to put one on the same footing as brushing a man's coat for him—a little daring, naïve.

I longed to know why he sat alone, why he carried the bag, what he did all day. But he himself volunteered some information.

"I fear," he said, "that my luggage will be damp. I invariably carry it with me in this bag—one requires so little—for servants are untrustworthy."

"A wise idea," I answered. And then: "Why have you denied us the pleasure—"

"I sit alone that I may eat more," said the Baron, peering into

the dusk; "my stomach requires a great deal of food. I order double portions, and eat them in peace."

Which sounded finely Baronial.

"And what do you do all day?"

"I imbibe nourishment in my room," he replied, in a voice that closed the conversation and almost repented of the umbrella.

When we arrived at the pension there was very nearly an open riot.

I ran half way up the stairs, and thanked the Baron audibly from the landing.

He distinctly replied: "Not at all!"

It was very friendly of the Herr Oberlehrer to have sent me a bouquet that evening, and the Frau Oberregierungsrat asked me for my pattern of a baby's bonnet!

. . . . . .

Next day the Baron was gone.

Sic transit gloria German mundi.

(1910)

THE SISTER OF THE BARONESS

"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!

(1910)

FRAU BRECHENMACHER ATTENDS A WEDDING

GETTING ready was a terrible business. After supper Frau Brechenmacher packed four of the five babies to bed, allowing Rosa to stay with her and help to polish the buttons of Herr Brechenmacher's uniform. Then she ran over his best shirt with a hot iron, polished his boots, and put a stitch or two into his black satin necktie.

"Rosa," she said, "fetch my dress and hang it in front of the stove to get the creases out. Now, mind, you must look after the children and not sit up later than half-past eight, and not touch the lamp—you know what will happen if you do."

"Yes, Mamma," said Rosa, who was nine and felt old enough to manage a thousand lamps. "But let me stay up—the 'Bub' may wake and want some milk."

"Half-past eight!" said the Frau. "I'll make the father tell you too."

Rosa drew down the corners of her mouth.

"But. . . but. . . "

"Here comes the father. You go into the bedroom and fetch my blue silk handkerchief. You can wear my black shawl while I'm out—there now!"

Rosa dragged it off her mother's shoulders and wound it carefully round her own, tying the two ends in a knot at the back. After all, she reflected, if she had to go to bed at half-past eight she would keep the shawl on. Which resolution comforted her absolutely.

"Now, then, where are my clothes?" cried Herr Brechenmacher, hanging his empty letter-bag behind the door and stamping the snow out of his boots. "Nothing ready, of course, and everybody at the wedding by this time. I heard the music as I passed. What are you doing? You're not dressed. You can't go like that."

"Here they are—all ready for you on the table, and some warm water in the tin basin. Dip your head in. Rosa, give your father the towel. Everything ready except the trousers. I haven't had time to shorten them. You must tuck the ends into your boots until we get there."

"Nu," said the Herr, "there isn't room to turn. I want the light. You go and dress in the passage."

Dressing in the dark was nothing to Frau Brechenmacher. She hooked her skirt and bodice, fastened her handkerchief round her neck with a beautiful brooch that had four medals to the Virgin dangling from it, and then drew on her cloak and hood.

"Here, come and fasten this buckle," called Herr Brechenmacher. He stood in the kitchen puffing himself out, the buttons on his blue uniform shining with an enthusiasm which nothing but official buttons could possibly possess. "How do I look?"

"Wonderful," replied the little Frau, straining at the waist buckle and giving him a little pull here, a little tug there. "Rosa, come and look at your father."

Herr Brechenmacher strode up and down the kitchen, was helped on with his coat, then waited while the Frau lighted the lantern.

"Now, then—finished at last! Come along."

"The lamp, Rosa," warned the Frau, slamming the front door behind them.

Snow had not fallen all day; the frozen ground was slippery as an

icepond. She had not been out of the house for weeks past, and the day had so flurried her that she felt muddled and stupid—felt that Rosa had pushed her out of the house and her man was running away from her.

"Wait, wait!" she cried.

"No. I'll get my feet damp—you hurry."

It was easier when they came into the village. There were fences to cling to, and leading from the railway station to the Gasthaus a little path of cinders had been strewn for the benefit of the wedding guests.

The Gasthaus was very festive. Lights shone out from every window, wreaths of fir twigs hung from the ledges. Branches decorated the front doors, which swung open, and in the hall the landlord voiced his superiority by bullying the waitresses, who ran about continually with glasses of beer, trays of cups and saucers, and bottles of wine.

"Up the stairs—up the stairs!" boomed the landlord. "Leave your coats on the landing."

Herr Brechenmacher, completely overawed by this grand manner, so far forgot his rights as a husband as to beg his wife's pardon for jostling her against the banisters in his efforts to get ahead of everybody else.

Herr Brechenmacher's colleagues greeted him with acclamation as he entered the door of the Festsaal, and the Frau straightened her brooch and folded her hands, assuming the air of dignity becoming to the wife of a postman and the mother of five children. Beautiful indeed was the Festsaal. Three long tables were grouped at one end, the remainder of the floor space cleared for dancing. Oil lamps, hanging from the ceiling, shed a warm, bright light on the walls decorated with paper flowers and garlands; shed a warmer, brighter light on the red faces of the guests in their best clothes.

At the head of the centre table sat the bride and bridegroom, she in a white dress trimmed with stripes and bows of coloured ribbon, giving