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2

# A CUP OF TEA

3

BY KATHERINE MANSFIELD

4

5

6 Rosemary Fell was not exactly beautiful. No, you couldn't have called her beautiful. Pretty?  
7 Well, if you took her to pieces... But why be so cruel as to take anyone to pieces? She was  
8 young, brilliant, extremely modern, exquisitely well dressed, amazingly well read in the newest  
9 of the new books, and her parties were the most delicious mixture of the really important  
10 people and... artists - quaint creatures, discoveries of hers, some of them too terrifying for  
11 words, but others quite presentable and amusing.

12

13 Rosemary had been married two years. She had a duck of a boy. No, not Peter - Michael.  
14 And her husband absolutely adored her. They were rich, really rich, not just comfortably well  
15 off, which is odious and stuffy and sounds like one's grandparents. But if Rosemary wanted to  
16 shop she would go to Paris as you and I would go to Bond Street. If she wanted to buy  
17 flowers, the car pulled up at that perfect shop in Regent Street, and Rosemary inside the  
18 shop just gazed in her dazzled, rather exotic way, and said: "I want those and those and  
19 those. Give me four bunches of those. And that jar of roses. Yes, I'll have all the roses in the  
20 jar. No, no lilac. I hate lilac. It's got no shape." The attendant bowed and put the lilac out of  
21 sight, as though this was only too true; lilac was dreadfully shapeless. "Give me those stumpy  
22 little tulips. Those red and white ones." And she was followed to the car by a thin shop-girl  
23 staggering under an immense white paper armful that looked like a baby in long clothes....

24

25 One winter afternoon she had been buying something in a little antique shop in Curzon

26 Street . It was a shop she liked. For one thing, one usually had it to oneself. And then the  
27 man who kept it was ridiculously fond of serving her. He beamed whenever she came in. He  
28 clasped his hands; he was so gratified he could scarcely speak. Flattery, of course. All the  
29 same, there was something...

30

31 "You see, madam," he would explain in his low respectful tones, "I love my things. I would  
32 rather not part with them than sell them to someone who does not appreciate them, who has  
33 not that fine feeling which is so rare..." And, breathing deeply, he unrolled a tiny square of  
34 blue velvet and pressed it on the glass counter with his pale finger-tips.

35

36 To-day it was a little box. He had been keeping it for her. He had shown it to nobody as yet.  
37 An exquisite little enamel box with a glaze so fine it looked as though it had been baked in  
38 cream. On the lid a minute creature stood under a flowery tree, and a more minute creature  
39 still had her arms round his neck. Her hat, really no bigger than a geranium petal, hung from  
40 a branch; it had green ribbons. And there was a pink cloud like a watchful cherub floating  
41 above their heads. Rosemary took her hands out of her long gloves. She always took off her  
42 gloves to examine such things. Yes, she liked it very much. She loved it; it was a great duck.  
43 She must have it. And, turning the creamy box, opening and shutting it, she couldn't help  
44 noticing how charming her hands were against the blue velvet. The shopman, in some dim  
45 cavern of his mind, may have dared to think so too. For he took a pencil, leant over the  
46 counter, and his pale, bloodless fingers crept timidly towards those rosy, flashing ones, as he  
47 murmured gently: "If I may venture to point out to madam, the flowers on the little lady's  
48 bodice."

49

50 "Charming!" Rosemary admired the flowers. But what was the price? For a moment the  
51 shopman did not seem to hear. Then a murmur reached her. "Twenty-eight guineas, madam."

52

53 "Twenty-eight guineas." Rosemary gave no sign. She laid the little box down; she buttoned  
54 her gloves again. Twenty-eight guineas. Even if one is rich... She looked vague. She stared at  
55 a plump tea-kettle like a plump hen above the shopman's head, and her voice was dreamy  
56 as she answered: "Well, keep it for me - will you? I'll..."

57

58 But the shopman had already bowed as though keeping it for her was all any human being  
59 could ask. He would be willing, of course, to keep it for her for ever.

60

61 The discreet door shut with a click. She was outside on the step, gazing at the winter  
62 afternoon. Rain was falling, and with the rain it seemed the dark came too, spinning down  
63 like ashes. There was a cold bitter taste in the air, and the new-lighted lamps looked sad.  
64 Sad were the lights in the houses opposite. Dimly they burned as if regretting something. And  
65 people hurried by, hidden under their hateful umbrellas. Rosemary felt a strange pang. She  
66 pressed her muff against her breast; she wished she had the little box, too, to cling to. Of  
67 course the car was there. She'd only to cross the pavement. But still she waited. There are  
68 moments, horrible moments in life, when one emerges from shelter and looks out, and it's  
69 awful. One oughtn't to give way to them. One ought to go home and have an extra-special  
70 tea. But at the very instant of thinking that, a young girl, thin, dark, shadowy - where had she  
71 come from? - was standing at Rosemary's elbow and a voice like a sigh, almost like a sob,  
72 breathed: "Madam, may I speak to you a moment?"

73

74 "Speak to me?" Rosemary turned. She saw a little battered creature with enormous eyes,  
75 someone quite young, no older than herself, who clutched at her coat-collar with reddened  
76 hands, and shivered as though she had just come out of the water.

77

78 "M-madam, stammered the voice. Would you let me have the price of a cup of tea?"

79

80 "A cup of tea?" There was something simple, sincere in that voice; it wasn't in the least the  
81 voice of a beggar. "Then have you no money at all?" asked Rosemary.

82

83 "None, madam," came the answer.

84

85 "How extraordinary!" Rosemary peered through the dusk and the girl gazed back at her.  
86 How more than extraordinary! And suddenly it seemed to Rosemary such an adventure. It  
87 was like something out of a novel by Dostoevsky, this meeting in the dusk. Supposing she took

88 the girl home? Supposing she did do one of those things she was always reading about or  
89 seeing on the stage, what would happen? It would be thrilling. And she heard herself saying  
90 afterwards to the amazement of her friends: "I simply took her home with me," as she  
91 stepped forward and said to that dim person beside her: "Come home to tea with me."

92

93 The girl drew back startled. She even stopped shivering for a moment. Rosemary put out a  
94 hand and touched her arm. "I mean it," she said, smiling. And she felt how simple and kind  
95 her smile was. "Why won't you? Do. Come home with me now in my car and have tea."

96

97 "You - you don't mean it, madam," said the girl, and there was pain in her voice.

98

99 "But I do," cried Rosemary. "I want you to. To please me. Come along."

100

101 The girl put her fingers to her lips and her eyes devoured Rosemary. "You're - you're not  
102 taking me to the police station?" she stammered.

103

104 "The police station!" Rosemary laughed out. "Why should I be so cruel? No, I only want to  
105 make you warm and to hear - anything you care to tell me."

106

107 Hungry people are easily led. The footman held the door of the car open, and a moment  
108 later they were skimming through the dusk.

109

110 "There!" said Rosemary. She had a feeling of triumph as she slipped her hand through the  
111 velvet strap. She could have said, "Now I've got you," as she gazed at the little captive she  
112 had netted. But of course she meant it kindly. Oh, more than kindly. She was going to prove  
113 to this girl that - wonderful things did happen in life, that - fairy godmothers were real, that -  
114 rich people had hearts, and that women were sisters. She turned impulsively, saying'. "Don't  
115 be frightened. After all, why shouldn't you come back with me? We're both women. If I'm the  
116 more fortunate, you ought to expect..."

117

118 But happily at that moment, for she didn't know how the sentence was going to end, the car

119 stopped. The bell was rung, the door opened, and with a charming, protecting, almost  
120 embracing movement, Rosemary drew the other into the hall. Warmth, softness, light, a sweet  
121 scent, all those things so familiar to her she never even thought about them, she watched that  
122 other receive. It was fascinating. She was like the rich little girl in her nursery with all the  
123 cupboards to open, all the boxes to unpack.

124

125 "Come, come upstairs," said Rosemary, longing to begin to be generous. "Come up to my  
126 room." And, besides, she wanted to spare this poor little thing from being stared at by the  
127 servants; she decided as they mounted the stairs she would not even ring to Jeanne, but take  
128 off her things by herself. The great things were to be natural!

129

130 And "There!" cried Rosemary again, as they reached her beautiful big bedroom with the  
131 curtains drawn, the fire leaping on her wonderful lacquer furniture, her gold cushions and the  
132 primrose and blue rugs.

133

134 The girl stood just inside the door; she seemed dazed. But Rosemary didn't mind that.

135

136 "Come and sit down," she cried, dragging her big chair up to the fire, "in this comfy chair.  
137 Come and get warm. You look so dreadfully cold."

138

139 "I daren't, madam," said the girl, and she edged backwards.

140

141 "Oh, please," - Rosemary ran forward - "you mustn't be frightened, you mustn't, really. Sit  
142 down, when I've taken off my things we shall go into the next room and have tea and be  
143 cozy. Why are you afraid?" And gently she half pushed the thin figure into its deep cradle.

144

145 But there was no answer. The girl stayed just as she had been put, with her hands by her  
146 sides and her mouth slightly open. To be quite sincere, she looked rather stupid. But Rosemary  
147 wouldn't acknowledge it. She leant over her, saying:

148

149 "Won't you take off your hat? Your pretty hair is all wet. And one is so much more

150 comfortable without a hat, isn't one?"

151

152 There was a whisper that sounded like "Very good, madam," and the crushed hat was taken  
153 off.

154

155 "And let me help you off with your coat, too," said Rosemary.

156

157 The girl stood up. But she held on to the chair with one hand and let Rosemary pull. It was  
158 quite an effort. The other scarcely helped her at all. She seemed to stagger like a child, and  
159 the thought came and went through Rosemary's mind, that if people wanted helping they  
160 must respond a little, just a little, otherwise it became very difficult indeed. And what was she  
161 to do with the coat now? She left it on the floor, and the hat too. She was just going to take  
162 a cigarette off the mantelpiece when the girl said quickly, but so lightly and strangely: "I'm  
163 very sorry, madam, but I'm going to faint. I shall go off, madam, if I don't have something."

164

165 "Good heavens, how thoughtless I am!" Rosemary rushed to the bell.

166

167 "Tea! Tea at once! And some brandy immediately!"

168

169 The maid was gone again, but the girl almost cried out: "No, I don't want no brandy.\* I never  
170 drink brandy. It's a cup of tea I want, madam." And she burst into tears.

171

172 It was a terrible and fascinating moment. Rosemary knelt beside her chair.

173

174 "Don't cry, poor little thing," she said. "Don't cry." And she gave the other her lace  
175 handkerchief. She really was touched beyond words. She put her arm round those thin, bird-  
176 like shoulders.

177

178 Now at last the other forgot to be shy, forgot everything except that they were both women,  
179 and gasped out: "I can't go on no longer like this. I can't bear it. I can't bear it. I shall do  
180 away with myself. I can't bear no more."

181

182 "You shan't have to. I'll look after you. Don't cry any more. Don't you see what a good thing  
183 it was that you met me? We'll have tea and you'll tell me everything. And I shall arrange  
184 something. I promise. Do stop crying. It's so exhausting. Please!"

185

186 The other did stop just in time for Rosemary to get up before the tea came. She had the  
187 table placed between them. She plied the poor little creature with everything, all the  
188 sandwiches, all the bread and butter, and every time her cup was empty she filled it with tea,  
189 cream and sugar. People always said sugar was so nourishing. As for herself she didn't eat;  
190 she smoked and looked away tactfully so that the other should not be shy.

191

192 And really the effect of that slight meal was marvellous. When the tea-table was carried  
193 away a new being, a light, frail creature with tangled hair, dark lips, deep, lighted eyes, lay  
194 back in the big chair in a kind of sweet languor, looking at the blaze. Rosemary lit a fresh  
195 cigarette; it was time to begin.

196

197 "And when did you have your last meal?" she asked softly.

198

199 But at that moment the door-handle turned.

200

201 "Rosemary, may I come in?" It was Philip.

202

203 "Of course."

204

205 He came in. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he said, and stopped and stared.

206

207 "It's quite all right," said Rosemary, smiling. "This is my friend, Miss - "

208

209 "Smith, madam," said the languid figure, who was strangely still and unafraid.

210

211 "Smith," said Rosemary. "We are going to have a little talk."

212

213 "Oh yes," said Philip. "Quite," and his eye caught sight of the coat and hat on the floor. He  
214 came over to the fire and turned his back to it. "It's a beastly afternoon," he said curiously,  
215 still looking at that listless figure, looking at its hands and boots, and then at Rosemary again.

216

217 "Yes, isn't it?" said Rosemary enthusiastically. "Vile."

218

219 Philip smiled his charming smile. "As a matter of fact," said he, "I wanted you to come into the  
220 library for a moment. Would you? Will Miss Smith excuse us?"

221

222 The big eyes were raised to him, but Rosemary answered for her: "Of course she will." And  
223 they went out of the room together.

224

225 "I say," said Philip, when they were alone. "Explain. Who is she? What does it all mean?"

226

227 Rosemary, laughing, leaned against the door and said: "I picked her up in Curzon Street .  
228 Really. She's a real pick-up. She asked me for the price of a cup of tea, and I brought her  
229 home with me. "

230

231 "But what on earth are you going to do with her?" cried Philip.

232

233 "Be nice to her," said Rosemary quickly. "Be frightfully nice to her. Look after her. I don't know  
234 how. We haven't talked yet. But show her - treat her - make her feel -"

235

236 "My darling girl," said Philip, "you're quite mad, you know. It simply can't be done."

237

238 "I knew you'd say that," retorted Rosemary. Why not? I want to. Isn't that a reason? And  
239 besides, one's always reading about these things. I decided -"

240

241 "But," said Philip slowly, and he cut the end of a cigar, "she's so astonishingly pretty."

242

243 "Pretty?" Rosemary was so surprised that she blushed. "Do you think so? I - I hadn't thought  
244 about it."

245

246 "Good Lord!" Philip struck a match. "She's absolutely lovely. Look again, my child. I was  
247 bowled over when I came into your room just now. However... I think you're making a ghastly  
248 mistake. Sorry, darling, if I'm crude and all that. But let me know if Miss Smith is going to dine  
249 with us in time for me to look up *The Milliner's Gazette*."

250

251 "You absurd creature!" said Rosemary, and she went out of the library, but not back to her  
252 bedroom. She went to her writing-room and sat down at her desk. Pretty! Absolutely lovely!  
253 Bowled over! Her heart beat like a heavy bell. Pretty! Lovely! She drew her cheque-book  
254 towards her. But no, cheques would be no use, of course. She opened a drawer and took out  
255 five pound notes, looked at them, put two back, and holding the three squeezed in her hand,  
256 she went back to her bedroom.

257

258 Half an hour later Philip was still in the library, when Rosemary came in.

259

260 "I only wanted to tell you," said she, and she leaned against the door again and looked at  
261 him with her dazzled exotic gaze, "Miss Smith won't dine with us to-night."

262

263 Philip put down the paper. "Oh, what's happened? Previous engagement?"

264

265 Rosemary came over and sat down on his knee. "She insisted on going," said she, "so I gave  
266 the poor little thing a present of money. I couldn't keep her against her will, could I?" she  
267 added softly.

268

269 Rosemary had just done her hair, darkened her eyes a little and put on her pearls. She put  
270 up her hands and touched Philip's cheeks.

271

272 "Do you like me?" said she, and her tone, sweet, husky, troubled him.

273

274 "I like you awfully," he said, and he held her tighter. "Kiss me."

275

276 There was a pause.

277

278 Then Rosemary said dreamily: "I saw a fascinating little box to-day. It cost twenty-eight  
279 guineas. May I have it?"

280

281 Philip jumped her on his knee. "You may, little wasteful one," said he.

282

283 But that was not really what Rosemary wanted to say.

284

285 "Philip," she whispered, and she pressed his head against her bosom, "am I pretty?"

286

287

[THE END]

288

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