

THE JUNGFRAU

Fraulein Else looked up from her work and saw him open the door of the boarding-house and enter. Still and almost ghostlike he stood there and for a long moment there was no sound. He was a stranger. He came with two fine suitcases. Through the open door the flock of mountains rose and in their deep pine blueness the outline of his figure seemed half buried. Most of all Fraulein Else noticed that he had the look of a lonely man. And from that moment, you might say, she took him to her heart.

She had been scrubbing the floor of the lobby. It was early morning; Interlaken slept. But here was the Fraulein scribbling, her plump hands slapping the brown water in the pail, wringing the mop with an honest strength. Now she arose and wiped her hands and approached the stranger.

"You wish ein room?"

Alan Bennet threw a long quiet look at the lobby. He might have answered her in German but there was something so warm about her fine attempt at English. The Fraulein saw him smile and carefully watched his lips move alit he explained to her that it must be a room looking out on the Jungfrau.

"You see, that is necessary, otherwise---"

"Ja, Ja, mit a balcony too! Joost for you, Jung herr, joost for you!"

Her eyes brightened. She seemed to sense the need of this man, of this stranger who had so suddenly and so wearily dropped into the lobby of the Grand Hotel early this morning. Meaningful days had swept into the life of Fraulein Else, even before this; even when they had to be punctuated with hours of scrubbing floors and making beds. She understood those spans of time that demanded to be noticed. They gave her time to think of all the strange happenings of the day, of the thin flow of foreigners who came like bright spots, vivid and suddenly vanishing. And within the pale of her daily life, just as so many others had come and gone, she seemed to understand that Alan Bennet, too, would lay the shadow of his heart on hers and go. And she would keep his memory before her long days after, as she still kept visions of wandering faces and spirits. Only the thought came to her now that him she would remember long after the others had faded in the dark.

While he was signing his name in the book, slowly and as if he must be deliberating, Fraulein Else disappeared, returned in a moment with a key and pronounced:

"Nomber zwei hoondred I think lucky, ja?"

But suddenly her smile fell as if it had been brushed away violently. There stood the stranger, gazing at her intently, kindly. And for the first time she noticed that he had but one arm. Fraulein Else was ashamed of herself for not having noticed it sooner, ashamed of showing her surprise so openly. Bending down she slowly laid her hands on the handles of his bags.

"No!" said the stranger's voice, like a voice from a cloud.

She stood up. He stretched out his five long fingers and grasped both handles in them at once. Softly he followed the blushing Fraulein to his room.

Summer afternoons that followed the Fraulein saw him sitting on his balcony trying to read, trying to write. But most of the time he had his eyes lifted to the mountain. And into his face would creep a look, as if he understood the Jungfrau, as if he were listening to a sad tale she was telling. And then the adoration, the complete giving up of himself to her--it was something

marvelous! You must not think the Fraulein did not notice. But she wondered why she liked to creep through the trellis vines that bordered the porch and watch him sitting alone, so high and lonely with only the Jungfrau for his guest. He might be displeased if he knew she was there, crouching in the shadows. And she knew that in the evenings he walked out around the garden paths, plucking leaves so thoughtfully, then scattering them about like discarded ideas, vain and useless. Sometimes the gold moon hung over the Jungfrau so exquisitely that he could not tear himself away and long after the lights in the house had gone out the Fraulein would peer through her black windows and see him strolling about in a wan way, whispering to himself. If she had known how sometimes a great desire would arise within him, a desire to stretch out his hand, to run, run--toward the pure whiteness of that languid peak. It lay so sheltered in between the greenness of other mountains; it looked so easy to reach. He always thought that if he could get there he would lie down in its cool snows and glisten in the moonlight, like a tree.

Strange it would be indeed were we to say that the Fraulein read into his heart and knew these thoughts. No one knew but Alan. But as one sometimes lives the moment of another soul vaguely, so did Fraulein Else in those luminous times find herself possessing a visionary glimpse into his inner heart, with something so childlike, so utterly waif-like in his face that even a maiden like the Fraulein must have long felt that tenderness that Mary felt when she looked upon her son in loneliness.

And not many days passed before Alan talked to her, as one talks to a being who has become more than a servant in a strange hotel where he is spending his days. For he was in the room one morning when the Fraulein was making his bed and dusting the chairs. Suddenly an idea occurred to her but when she attempted its announcement her voice was very low and soft and her cheeks flamed red.

"Herr Bennet," she spoke to him in German, "I think perhaps it would be easy; to move your bed to the other wall.

Then with the balcony doors full open you could lie abed and watch the--the Jungfrau." And almost immediately she wondered if she had been too bold with her thoughts. But if he knew how she wanted him to be able to see the sunrise color the mountain, perhaps he would forgive her--

"You are good, Fraulein, to think of that. Let us see."

And so together they shoved and pushed the heavy bed into the corner, into a direct line with the mountain. Fraulein Else smoothed the hair under her white cap when they had finished. She thought of the window sill she had neglected to dust and tiptoed across the room as if Alan must be living in a dream and she feared to disturb him. But he spoke to her again and she smiled with gratitude even before he had finished his sentence.

"You keep my rooms so clean, Fraulein. If all your tenants give you the trouble I do you must be busy every minute."

"Trouble? Ah, no, Herr Bennet. It is one great pleasure. I do not tire. You see," and, she laughed, "I am a strong German girl!"

"Young and happy, with a life before you."

Fraulein Else did not understand why he spoke so sadly, this young man, so kind and gentle, who must like everyone and

be loved by all. But she knew somehow that behind his words and the look in his eyes lay a great trouble.

"You were in--war, Herr Bennet?" She felt it must have taken his arm away, the arm she wished with all her heart he had, that belonged to his fine young body.

"Yes," he answered, "you see what my dear brother German took from me for a souvenir!" And he smiled bitterly and touched his empty sleeve.

The moment he had spoken he was sorry. He liked this Fraulein and now--somehow he didn't connect her with the war, as one does not think of a single bright flower among a festering weed patch. Fraulein Else felt a deep pain in her heart, as if this young Herr Bennet had stabbed her. She knew he did not mean it that way. It was just said, like that, before he thought. And it was true. Would he hate her for it, because she was a German, because one of her soldier boys had done it? Fraulein Else never had a soldier boy she liked as much as this Englishman. And war was a horrible thing. It was harder that Alan would ever guess for the Fraulein to keep the tears back. But she did. She even smiled.

"Herr Bennet, you must forgive him. He could not do it now, if he could see you. Maybe he is good here--" and she pointed to her heart, "and would suffer to see what this war taught him. It was wrong."

And from that moment the Fraulein knew that no sacrifice she could make would be enough for him, for this young gentle-man who was maimed by her country. Upon herself she took the burden, and she bore it with a love that filled her days with happiness.

The next day they talked together again. She did not dream it would be like this. He could not see how she was clutching the door knob for joy as she leaned against it and listened to him tell her how it was to awaken at dawn, to see from his bed how the lights played about the sky and threw glows on the mountain top.

"You brought me this, Fraulein, so easily--and it means much to me. I can not tell you."

"Ah," she murmured, almost under her breath, "you love the Jungfrau, don't you?"

Alan's eyes closed for an instant and he took a slow deep breath,

"No one knows, no one knows how much!"

And in her heart beat the words:

"I do know--I do know how it is with you!"

"You see," he went on, "I was a little boy when I first saw the Jungfrau. I had a mother then, and a nurse and happy people all about me. Each summer we journeyed to Interlaken and spent many weeks here, in the old Hotel Hof, the one that is gone now. We travelled to France too, and Italy, but always I longed to be here, for I loved that mountain and I seemed to be happiest here. And my mother, because she loved me, always brought me back and we were happy again."

Fraulein Else smiled; she had a vision of Herr Bennet, a little boy with starched blouses and yellow hair, holding his mother's hand in his, wandering about the lanes of Interlaken with his eyes on the mountain.

"Suddenly everything went--like that:" And Alan Bennet dropped his hand heavily on the table. "My mother, the money, the travels to the Jungfrau. For many years I did not see it.

Then the war came and after that I went back to England. Suddenly I am here again, Fraulein, I hardly know how,"

She was glad, glad that he had come back:

"And I shall spend these days here. I must see the Jungfrau again as I used to see her, drink her in, absorb her, love her until I am so full of her beauty that when I go away. I may carry her with me in my heart. And so, every day is like a farewell. I spend them watching, waiting. Ah, it is so hard, Fraulein, the waiting!" He put his hand to his forehead and brushed back his hair.

The Fraulein stood motionless. She could not quite understand. She was confused.

"Waiting?" she repeated after him.

"Waiting. Then it will be the end here and I shall have to go."

Fraulein Else felt something dark settle on her heart. She looked out of the window and there, too, dark clouds were gathering in the sky, slowly and heavily, as if they were responding to her being's wonderment. A letter, perhaps, telling him that he must come to England. How would it be--when he went away from Interlaken, left the room empty, the balcony with the vines creeping up, no one looking at the Jungfrau as he used to gaze at it no one loving it in just that way? And he would forget about her; he would never, never know how she had watched him, how she had wondered tenderly.

"Soon?" she could not help asking. "Soon--will it be?" His brows were knitted together as he wheeled round to her.

"Fraulein," he almost pleaded, "Fraulein, pray for me, pray that it will be long--long! Do you believe in God?" "I--don't--know--"

"Do you ever pray?"

"Sometimes--only when--"

"Then sometimes will you pray for me?"

The bell rang through the corridor. She caught her hands to her breast.

"Yes, yes!" she whispered, "for you I can pray!"

And as she sped down the empty hall only one thought rang in her brain: "He hopes it will be long--long--"

At the end of the month Alan became very tired, very weary. He would lie in bed whole mornings. The Fraulein brought his breakfasts to him these days. And after she had set her tray on the table beside his bed she would walk over to the glass doors and before shutting them to the sight of the white mountain in the early sunlight he would talk for a moment about how beautiful it was. Each morning it was lovelier, more magnificent, more overwhelming. It was hard to say too much--better to look, to drink it in, to love. There was such a peace growing into the Fraulein's days, such an exquisiteness that she could not understand. She only knew it was there and was glad. She wondered if it were so with Alan. Sometimes she thought it must be, but sometimes she saw shadows in his face, in his eyes. There were things the Fraulein knew she could do that would make him glad for moments at a time, things that would blot the shadows out, and at those times even she forgot about the great trouble that lay behind his heart. Each afternoon the Fraulein had one free hour wherein she might do as she pleased, and then her thoughts were all on Alan. She felt that he, too, must notice how she liked to be with him, doing things for him, if it were only to smooth his bed or draw his blinds against the sun. For one day he asked her if she would like to read some German aloud to him--his eyes, he said, grew weak from looking on print, and besides, the Fraulein had made him want to know more of the beauties of the German tongue; and it was the tongue of the Jungfrau, the mountain that sang to Alan and even to Fraulein Else such lyrical songs of beauty.

And so, after the first days, after the Fraulein had forgotten to be shy about reading before this dear friend who was so educated a gentleman, the hours they spent together were filled with a great loveliness. The room would be hushed, save for the low young voice of the Fraulein who read her words carefully and seemed to carry to them a tender regard for their beauty. And during the hour she saw how Alan lay back in his chair listening, gazing through the open doorway out to the Jungfrau, then to the bright flushed face of the Fraulein, then back to the mountain again, as if the span of the world lay between these two--these creatures of light and beauty.

It was a morning of great radiance, that particular morning that the Fraulein remembers as the most poignant of her life. There had been so many happy days, weeks full of days, months full of days. And it was so queer to come into his room one morning to find the glass doors closed, the doors that looked out to the radiant sunlit mountain. Perhaps he had fallen asleep, she thought, and had forgotten to open them last night. Thin shadows sprawled over the rug and wan streaks of light were trying vainly to creep through the curtain slits. It was strange, the picture of it, so different from other mornings. Then she wished to surprise him, to creep across the room, slide the doors open. But when she reached them there was a sound from the bed.

"Fraulein!"

Smiling to herself she flung the doors out. "Ah!" she breathed ecstatically as if her heart, not her voice, were speaking. "Die Jungfrau!"

And the sight of the mountain burst through the room. She turned to the bed.

"How could you forget her?" she laughed. "Herr Bennet, see how beautiful she is;"

Alan Bennet sat up in bed and stared. His face was drawn and gray, as if he had just emerged from a great suffering, stony, bleak. His eyes were filled with a dullness, a dead gazing, like eyes that were painted on a flat white face, without color, without meaning. The Fraulein's hand moved slowly to her throat for in it she felt gathering a thick dryness. She flung a glance at the mountain to see what in its picture could be killing her poor Herr Bennet. There it rose, like a looming bride of the morning.

"She is beautiful," whispered Alan,

And then Fraulein Else saw with a great quick glance that he saw no mountain through the doorway, he saw no door, he saw no chair---he saw nothing in the world! Such a stillness stole over her, such a hot unearthly stillness. Suddenly through the room rang the sharp cry of the Fraulein. She flung herself on her knees at his bed and grasped his hand as it lay quietly and solemnly on the coverlet.

"Ach, Herr Bennet, you do not see---you do not see! What has happened! How is it--that--you do not see! Ach, Herr Bennet mein! I know--you are blind!"

Her wild sobs were smothered in the covers and there was the sound of heavy breathing in the room. And now it seemed to the Fraulein that her head was fuel of fire. Never had she known a moment like this. For she lived not her sorrow but his. And it seemed to her that in that moment she became Herr Bennet, all his pain was her pain, all his suffering hers. She knew that the light of the world died out and the rest of his days would be full of the broken sobs of her soul and blackness, deep, deep blackness. The Jungfrau was gone. Gone was everything. Now he would die.

"Now you will die!" she whispered aloud and did not dream what a strange thing it was to say.

After years of moments had gone by she felt the warm moist hand of Herr Bennet on her hair. And all the trembling was gone. It was like the hand of an angel, calm and full of life.

"Yes. I thought I would die, Fraulein. I saw no other end but death. Fraulein, the Jungfrau is gone, and it is not so sad. I understand this moment why. Fraulein, you are here, are you not?"

And Fraulein Else raised her face and even in her wonderment forgot that he was blind and sought his eyes. He looked on her as he looked on the world and on all the days to come---tranquil and with a great love.