

A Suburban Fairy Tale

By Katherine Mansfield

Mr. and Mrs. B. sat at breakfast in the cosy red dining-room of their ‘snug little crib just under half-an-hour’s run from the City.’

There was a good fire in the grate—for the dining-room was the living-room as well—the two windows overlooking the cold empty garden patch were closed, and the air smelled agreeably of bacon and eggs, toast and coffee. Now that this rationing business was really over Mr. B. made a point of a thoroughly good tuck-in before facing the very real perils of the day. He didn’t mind who knew it—he was a true Englishman about his breakfast—he had to have it; he’d cave in without it, and if you told him that these Continental chaps could get through half the morning’s work he did on a roll and a cup of coffee—you simply didn’t know what you were talking about.

Mr. B. was a stout youngish man who hadn’t been able—worse luck—to chuck his job and join the Army; he’d tried for four years to get another chap to take his place, but it was no go. He sat at the head of the table reading the *Daily Mail*. Mrs. B. was a youngish plump little body, rather like a pigeon. She sat opposite, preening herself behind the coffee set and keeping an eye of warning love on Little B. who perched between them, swathed in a napkin and tapping the top of a soft-boiled egg.

Alas! Little B. was not at all the child that such parents had every right to expect. He was no fat little trot, no dumpling, no firm little pudding. He was undersized for his age, with legs like macaroni, tiny claws, soft, soft hair that felt like mouse fur and big wide-open eyes.

For some strange reason everything in life seemed the wrong size for Little B.—too big and too violent. Everything knocked him over, took the wind out of his feeble sails and left him gasping and frightened. Mr. and Mrs. B. were quite powerless to prevent this; they could only pick him up after the mischief was done—and try to set him going again. And Mrs. B. loved him as only weak children are loved—and when Mr. B. thought what a marvellous little chap • he was too-thought of the spunk of the little man, he—well he—by George—he . . .

‘Why aren’t there two kinds of eggs?’ said little B. ‘Why aren’t there little eggs for children and big eggs like what this one is for grown-ups?’

‘Scotch hares,’ said Mr. B. ‘Fine Scotch hares for 5s. 3d. How about getting one, old girl?’

‘It would be a nice change, wouldn’t it?’ said Mrs. B. ‘Jugged.’

And they looked across at each other and there floated between them the Scotch hare in its rich gravy with stuffing balls and a white pot of redcurrant jelly accompanying it.

‘We might have had it for the week-end,’ said Mrs. B. ‘But the butcher has promised me a nice little sirloin and it seems a pity’ . . . Yes, it did, and yet . . . Dear me, it was very difficult to decide. The hare would have been such a change—on the other hand, could you beat a really nice little sirloin?’

‘There’s hare soup, too,, said Mr. B. drumming his fingers on the table. ‘Best soup in the world!’

‘O-oh!’ cried Little B. so suddenly and sharply that it gave them quite a start— Look at the whole lot of sparrows flown on to our lawn’—he waved his spoon. ‘Look at them,’ he cried, ‘Look!’ And while he spoke, even though the windows were closed, they heard a loud shrill cheeping and chirping, from the garden.

‘Get on with your breakfast like a good boy, do,’ said his mother, and his father said, ‘You stick to the egg, old man, and look sharp about it.’

‘But look at them—look at them all hopping,’ he cried. ‘They don’t keep still not for a minute. Do you think they’re hungry, father?’

Cheek-a-cheep-cheep-cheek! cried the sparrows.

‘Best postpone it perhaps till next week,’ said Mr. B., ‘and trust to luck they’re still to be had then.’

‘Yes, perhaps that would be wiser,’ said Mrs. B.

Mr. B. picked another plum out of his paper.

‘Have you bought any of those controlled dates yet?’

‘I managed to get two pounds yesterday,’ said Mrs. B.

‘Well, a date pudding’s a good thing,’ said Mr. B. And they looked across at each other and there floated between them a dark round pudding covered with creamy sauce. ‘It would be a nice change, wouldn’t it?’ said Mrs. B.

Outside on the grey frozen grass the funny eager sparrows hopped and fluttered. They were never for a moment still. They cried, flapped their ungainly wings. Little B., his egg finished, got down, took his bread and marmalade to eat at the window.

‘Do let us give them some crumbs,’ he said. ‘Do open the window, father, and throw them something. Father, *please!*’

‘Oh, don’t nag, child,’ said Mrs. B., and his father said—‘Can’t go opening windows, old man. You’d get your head bitten off.’

‘But they’re hungry,’ cried Little B., and the sparrows’ little voices were like ringing of little knives being sharpened. *Cheek-a-cheep-cheep-cheek!* they cried.

Little B. dropped his bread and marmalade inside the china flowerpot in front of the window. He slipped behind the thick curtains to see better, and Mr. and Mrs. B. went on reading about what you could get now without coupons—no more ration books after May—a glut of cheese—a glut of it—whole cheeses revolved in the air between them like celestial bodies.

Suddenly as Little B. watched the sparrows on the grey frozen grass, they grew, they changed, still flapping and squeaking. They turned into tiny little boys, in brown coats, dancing, jigging outside, up and down outside the window squeaking, ‘Want something to eat, want something to eat!’ Little B. held with both hands to the curtain. ‘Father,’ he whispered, ‘Father! They’re not sparrows. They’re little boys. Listen, Father!’ But Mr. and Mrs. B. would not hear. He tried again. ‘Mother,’ he whispered. ‘Look at the little boys. They’re not sparrows, Mother!’ But nobody noticed his nonsense.

‘All this talk about famine,’ cried Mr. B., ‘all a Fake, all a Blind.’ With white shining faces, their arms flapping in the big coats, the little boys danced. ‘Want something to eat, want something to eat.’

‘Father,’ muttered Little B. ‘Listen, Father! Mother, listen, please!’

‘Really!’ said Mrs. B. ‘The noise those birds are making! I’ve never heard such a thing.’

‘Fetch me my shoes, old man,’ said Mr. B.

Cheek-a-cheep-cheep-cheek! said the sparrows.

Now where had that child got to? ‘Come and finish your nice cocoa, my pet,’ said Mrs. B.

Mr. B. lifted the heavy cloth and whispered, ‘Come on, Rover,’ but no little dog was there.

‘He’s behind the curtain,’ said Mrs. B.

‘He never went out of the room,’ said Mr. B.

Mrs. B. went over to the window and Mr. B. followed. And they looked out. There on the grey frozen grass, with a white, white face, the little boy's thin arms flapping like wings, in front of them all, the smallest, tiniest was Little B. Mr. and Mrs. B. heard his voice above all the voices. 'Want something to eat, want something to eat.'

Somehow, somehow, they opened the window. 'You shall! All of you. Come in *at once*. Old man! Little man!'

But it was too late. The little boys were changed into sparrows again, and away they flew—out of sight—out of call.