

Mr & Mrs Dove Katherine Mansfield (abridged)

Of course he knew - no man better - that he hadn't a ghost of a chance, he hadn't an earthly. The very idea of such a thing was preposterous. In fact, nothing short of desperation, nothing short of the fact that this was positively his last day in England for God knows how long, would have screwed him up to it.

He chose a tie out of the chest of drawers, a blue and cream check tie, and sat on the side of the bed. Supposing she replied, 'What impertinence!' would he be surprised? Not in the least, he decided. He expected her to say something like that. Nervously he tied a bow in front of the mirror, jammed his hair down with both hands, and pulled out the flaps of his jacket pockets. Reggie took out his cigarette case, but remembering how the mater hated him to smoke in his bedroom, put it back. No, he was dashed if he could think of one blessed thing in his favour, while she....Ah!....

In spite of every single thing you could think of, so terrific was his love that he couldn't help hoping. It gave him the courage to bound down

stairs, to snatch his straw hat from the hall, and to say as he closed the front door, 'Well, I can only try my luck, that's all.'

But his luck gave him a nasty jar, to say the least, almost immediately. Promenading up and down the garden path with Chinny and Bidy, the ancient Pokes, was the mater. She, with her scissors outspread to snap the head of a dead something or other, stopped at the sight of Reggie.

'You are not going out, Reginald?' she asked, seeing that he was. 'I'll be back for tea, mater,' said Reggie weakly, plunging his hands into his jacket pockets.

Snip. Off came a head. Reggie almost jumped.

'I should have thought you could have spared your mother your last afternoon,' said she.

Silence. The Pokes stared. They understood every word of the mater's.

'And where are you going, if your mother may ask?' asked the mater.

It was over at last, but Reggie did not slow down until he was out of sight of the house and halfway to Colonel Proctor's. Only then did he notice what a top-hole afternoon it was. The hedges smelled of briar, the hollyhocks glowed in the cottage gardens. But here was Colonel Proctor's -

His hand had grasped the bell, given it a pull, and started it pealing wildly, as if he'd come to say the house was on fire. The housemaid must have been in the hall, too, for the front door flashed open, and Reggie was shut in the empty drawing room before that confounded bell had even stopped ringing. In one moment the door would open, and his fate be decided. The feeling was not unlike that of being at the dentist's.

The door handle turned. Anne came in, crossed the shadowy space between them, gave him her hand, and said, in her small, soft voice, 'I'm so sorry, father is out. And mother is having a day in town, hat-hunting. There's only me to entertain you, Reggie.'

Reggie pressed his hat to his jacket buttons, and stammered out,

'As a matter of fact, I've only come.... to say goodbye.'

'Oh!' cried Anne softly - 'what a very short visit!'

Then, watching him, she laughed a long soft peal, and walked away from him over to the piano, and leaned against it.

'I'm so sorry' she said, 'to be laughing like this. I don't know why I do. It's just a bad ha-habit.' And suddenly she stamped her grey shoe. 'I really must conquer it, it's too absurd,' said she, pressing a small handkerchief to her mouth.

But the truth was, and they both knew it, she wasn't always laughing; it wasn't always a habit. Only ever since the day they'd met, ever since that first moment, for some strange reason that Reggie wished to God he understood, Anne had laughed at him. Why? It didn't matter where they were or what they were talking about, in the middle of a sentence, Anne would glance at him, and a little quiver would pass over her face, and she would begin laughing. Now she tucked the handkerchief away.

'Do sit down,' said she. 'And smoke, won't you? It is tomorrow that you're going, isn't it?'

'Yes, tomorrow as ever is,' said Reggie.

Reggie took a deep breath of his cigarette. 'It's ghastly, this idea of going back to Rhodesia,' he said.

'Coo-roo-coo-coo-coo,' sounded from the quiet.

'But you're fond of being out there, aren't you?' said Anne. 'Father was saying only the other night how lucky he thought you were to have a life of your own.'

'I don't feel frightfully lucky,' he said lightly.

'Roo-coo-coo-coo,' came again. And Anne murmured, 'You mean it's lonely.'

'Oh, it isn't the loneliness I care about,' said Reginald. Suddenly, to his horror, he felt himself blushing.

'Roo-coo-coo-coo! Roo-coo-coo-coo!'

Anne jumped up. 'Come and say goodbye to my doves,' she said.

'They've been moved to the side veranda. You do like doves, don't you, Reggie?'

'Awfully,' said Reggie, so fervently that as he opened the French window for her and stood to one side, Anne ran forward and laughed at the doves instead. To and fro, to and fro over the fine red sand on the floor of the dove house, walked the two doves. One was always in front of the other.

'You see,' explained Anne, 'the one in front, she's Mrs Dove. She looks

at Mr Dove and gives that little laugh and runs forward, and he follows her, bowing and bowing. And that makes her laugh again. Away she runs, and after her...' cried Anne, '...comes poor Mr Dove, bowing and bowing ... and that's their whole life.'

Reggie gave no sign of having seen the doves or having heard a word. For the moment he was conscious only of the immense effort it took to tear his secret out of himself and offer it to Anne.

'Anne, do you think you could ever care for me?'

It was done. It was over.

Anne turned over the grains of maize on her palm with one finger. Then slowly she shut her hand, and murmured, 'No, never in that way. It isn't that I'm not awfully fond of you,' she said. 'I am. But'- her eyes widened - 'not in that way' - a quiver passed over her face. Her lips parted, and she couldn't stop herself. She began laughing.

'There, you see, you see,' she cried 'it's your check t-tie. Your tie reminds me fearfully of the bow-tie that cats wear in pictures! Oh, please forgive me for being so horrid, please?'

Reggie caught hold of her little warm hand.

'There's no question of forgiving you,' he said quickly. 'How could there be? And I do believe I know why I make you laugh. It's because you're so far above me in every way that I am somehow ridiculous.'

'No, no.' Anne squeezed his hand hard. 'It's not that. I'm not far above you at all. I've never felt so happy with anyone. But I'm sure it's not what people and what books mean when they talk about love. Do you understand? We'd be like ... Mr and Mrs Dove.'

That did it. That seemed to Reginald final, and so terribly true that he could hardly bear it.

'I must be getting along home,' he croaked, and he began walking across the lawn. But Anne ran after him.

'No, don't. You can't go yet,' said she imploringly. 'You can't possibly go away feeling like that. Surely you do see how fatal it would be for us to marry, don't you?'

'Oh, quite, quite,' said Reggie, looking at her with haggard eyes. 'I mean, it's all very well for Mr and Mrs Dove,' she said, 'but imagine that in real life - imagine it!'

'Oh, absolutely,' said Reggie, and he started to walk on.

'Roo-coo-coo-coo! Roo-coo-coo-coo!' sounded from the veranda.

'Reggie, Reggie,' from the garden.

He stopped, he turned. But when she saw his timid, puzzled look, she gave a little laugh.

'Come back, Mr Dove,' said Anne.

And Reggie turned and came slowly back across the lawn.