



## A BLAZE (1911)

By Katherine Mansfield

"Max, you silly devil, you'll break your neck if you go careering down the slide that way. Drop it, and come to the Club House with me and get some coffee."

"I've had enough for to-day. I'm damp all through. There, give us a cigarette, Victor, old man. When are you going home?"

"Not for another hour. It's fine this afternoon, and I'm getting into decent shape. Look out, get off the track; here comes Fräulein Winkel. Damned elegant the way she manages her sleigh!"

"I'm cold all through. That's the worst of this place—the mists—it's a damp cold. Here, Forman, look after this sleigh—and stick it somewhere so that I can get it without looking through a hundred and fifty others to-morrow morning."

They sat down at a small round table near the stove and ordered coffee. Victor sprawled in his chair, patting his little brown dog Bobo and looking, half laughingly, at Max.

"What's the matter, my dear? Isn't the world being nice and pretty?"

"I want my coffee, and I want to put my feet into my pocket—they're like stones... Nothing to eat, thanks—the cake is like underdone india-rubber here."

Fuchs and Wistuba came and sat at their table. Max half turned his back and stretched his feet out to the oven. The three other men all began talking at once—of the weather—of the record slide—of the fine condition of the Wald See for skating.

Suddenly Fuchs looked at Max, raised his eyebrows and nodded across to Victor, who shook his head.

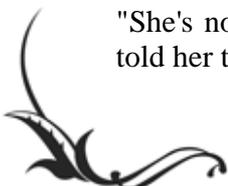
"Baby doesn't feel well," he said, feeding the brown dog with broken lumps of sugar, "and nobody's to disturb him—I'm nurse."

"That's the first time I've ever known him off colour," said Wistuba. "I've always imagined he had the better part of this world that could not be taken away from him. I think he says his prayers to the dear Lord for having spared him being taken home in seven basketsful to-night. It's a fool's game to risk your all that way and leave the nation desolate."

"Dry up," said Max. "You ought to be wheeled about on the snow in a perambulator."

"Oh, no offence, I hope. Don't get nasty. How's your wife, Victor?"

"She's not at all well. She hurt her head coming down the slide with Max on Sunday. I told her to stay at home all day."



"I'm sorry. Are you other fellows going back to the town or stopping on here?"

Fuchs and Victor said they were stopping—Max did not answer, but sat motionless while the men paid for their coffee and moved away. Victor came back a moment and put a hand on his shoulder.

"If you're going right back, my dear, I wish you'd look Elsa up and tell her I won't be in till late. And feed with us to-night at Limpold, will you? And take some hot grog when you get in."

"Thanks, old fellow, I'm all right. Going back now."

He rose, stretched himself, buttoned on his heavy coat and lighted another cigarette.

From the door Victor watched him plunging through the heavy snow—head bent—hands thrust in his pockets—he almost appeared to be running through the heavy snow towards the town.

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Someone came stamping up the stairs—paused at the door of her sitting-room, and knocked.

"Is that you, Victor?" she called.

"No, it is I... can I come in?"

"Of course. Why, what a Santa Claus! Hang your coat on the landing and shake yourself over the banisters. Had a good time?"

The room was full of light and warmth. Elsa, in a white velvet tea-gown, lay curled up on the sofa—a book of fashions on her lap, a box of creams beside her.

The curtains were not yet drawn before the windows and a blue light shone through, and the white boughs of the trees sprayed across.

A woman's room—full of flowers and photographs and silk pillows—the floor smothered in rugs—an immense tiger-skin under the piano—just the head protruding—sleepily savage.

"It was good enough," said Max. "Victor can't be in till late. He told me to come up and tell you."

He started walking up and down—tore off his gloves and flung them on the table.

"Don't do that, Max," said Elsa, "you get on my nerves. And I've got a headache to-day; I'm feverish and quite flushed... Don't I look flushed?"

He paused by the window and glanced at her a moment over his shoulder.

"No," he said; "I didn't notice it."

"Oh, you haven't looked at me properly, and I've got a new tea-gown on, too." She pulled her skirts together and patted a little place on the couch.



"Come along and sit by me and tell me why you're being naughty."

But, standing by the window, he suddenly flung his arm across his eyes.

"Oh," he said, "I can't. I'm done—I'm spent—I'm smashed."

Silence in the room. The fashion-book fell to the floor with a quick rustle of leaves. Elsa sat forward, her hands clasped in her lap; a strange light shone in her eyes, a red colour stained her mouth.

Then she spoke very quietly.

"Come over here and explain yourself. I don't know what on earth you are talking about."

"You do know—you know far better than I. You've simply played with Victor in my presence that I may feel worse. You've tormented me—you've led me on—offering me everything and nothing at all. It's been a spider-and-fly business from first to last—and I've never for one moment been ignorant of that—and I've never for one moment been able to withstand it."

He turned round deliberately.

"Do you suppose that when you asked me to pin your flowers into your evening gown—when you let me come into your bedroom when Victor was out while you did your hair—when you pretended to be a baby and let me feed you with grapes—when you have run to me and searched in all my pockets for a cigarette—knowing perfectly well where they were kept—going through every pocket just the same—I knowing too—I keeping up the farce—do you suppose that now you have finally lighted your bonfire you are going to find it a peaceful and pleasant thing—you are going to prevent the whole house from burning?"

She suddenly turned white and drew in her breath sharply.

"Don't talk to me like that. You have no right to talk to me like that. I am another man's wife."

"Hum," he sneered, throwing back his head, "that's rather late in the game, and that's been your trump card all along. You only love Victor on the cat-and-cream principle—you a poor little starved kitten that he's given everything to, that he's carried in his breast, never dreaming that those little pink claws could tear out a man's heart."

She stirred, looking at him with almost fear in her eyes.

"After all"—unsteadily—"this is my room; I'll have to ask you to go."

But he stumbled towards her, knelt down by the couch, burying his head in her lap, clasping his arms round her waist.

"And I *love* you—I love you; the humiliation of it—I adore you. Don't—don't—just a minute let me stay here—just a moment in a whole life—Elsa! Elsa!"

She leant back and pressed her head into the pillows.



Then his muffled voice: "I feel like a savage. I want your whole body. I want to carry you away to a cave and love you until I kill you—you can't understand how a man feels. I kill myself when I see you—I'm sick of my own strength that turns in upon itself, and dies, and rises new born like a Phoenix out of the ashes of that horrible death. Love me just this once, tell me a lie, *say* that you do—you are always lying."

Instead, she pushed him away—frightened.

"Get up," she said; "suppose the servant came in with the tea?"

"Oh, ye gods!" He stumbled to his feet and stood staring down at her.

"You're rotten to the core and so am I. But you're heathenishly beautiful."

The woman went over to the piano—stood there—striking one note—her brows drawn together. Then she shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"I'll make a confession. Every word you have said is true. I can't help it. I can't help seeking admiration any more than a cat can help going to people to be stroked. It's my nature. I'm born out of my time. And yet, you know, I'm not a *common* woman. I like men to adore me—to flatter me—even to make love to me—but I would never give myself to any man. I would never let a man kiss me... even."

"It's immeasurably worse—you've no legitimate excuse. Why, even a prostitute has a greater sense of generosity!"

"I know," she said, "I know perfectly well—but I can't help the way I'm built... Are you going?"

He put on his gloves.

"Well," he said, "what's going to happen to us now?"

Again she shrugged her shoulders.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I never have—just let things occur."

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"All alone?" cried Victor. "Has Max been here?"

"He only stayed a moment, and wouldn't even have tea. I sent him home to change his clothes... He was frightfully boring."

"You poor darling, your hair's coming down. I'll fix it, stand still a moment... so you were bored?"

"Um—m—frightfully... Oh, you've run a hairpin right into your wife's head—you naughty boy!"

She flung her arms round his neck and looked up at him, half laughing, like a beautiful, loving child.

"God! What a woman you are," said the man. "You make me so infernally proud—dearest, that I... I tell you!"

