



## A BAD IDEA (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

Something's happened to me—something bad. And I don't know what to do about it. I don't see any way out for the life of me. The worst of it is, I can't get this thing into focus—if you know what I mean. I just feel in a muddle—in the hell of a muddle. It ought to be plain to anyone that I'm not the kind of man to get mixed up in a thing like this. I'm not one of your actor Johnnies, or a chap in a book. I'm—well, I knew what I was all right until yesterday. But now—I feel helpless, yes, that's the word, helpless. Here I sit, chucking stones at the sea like a child that's missed its mother. And everybody else has cut along home hours ago and tea's over and it's getting on for time to light the lamp. I shall have to go home too, sooner or later. I see that, of course. In fact, would you believe it? at this very moment I wish I was there in spite of everything. What's she doing? My wife, I mean. Has she cleared away? Or has she stayed there staring at the table with the plates pushed back? My God! when I think that I could howl like a dog—if you know what I mean. . . .

I should have realized it was all U.P. this morning when she didn't get up for breakfast. I did, in a way. But I couldn't face it. I had the feeling that if I said nothing special and just treated it as one of her bad headache days and went off to the office, by the time I got back this evening the whole affair would have blown over somehow. No, that wasn't it. I felt a bit like I do now, "helpless." What was I to do? Just go on. That was all I could think of. So I took her up a cup of tea and a couple of slices of thin bread and butter as per usual on her headache days. The blind was still down. She was lying on her back. I think she had a wet handkerchief on her forehead. I'm not sure, for I couldn't look at her. It was a beastly feeling. And she said in a weak kind of voice, "Put the jug on the table, will you?" I put it down. I said, "Can I do anything?" And she said, "No. I'll be all right in half an hour." But her voice, you know! It did for me. I barged out as quick as I could, snatched my hat and stick from the hall-stand and dashed off for the tram.

Here's a queer thing—you needn't believe me if you don't want to—the moment I got out of the house I forgot that about my wife. It was a splendid morning, soft, with the sun making silver ducks on the sea. The kind of morning when you know it's going to keep hot and fine all day. Even the tram bell sounded different, and the little school kids crammed between people's knees had bunches of flowers. I don't know—I can't understand why—I just felt happy, but happy in a way I'd never been before, happy to beat the band! That wind that had been so strong the night before was still blowing a bit. It felt like her—the other—touching me. Yes, it did. Brought it back, every bit of it. If I told you how it took me, you'd say I was mad. I felt reckless—didn't care if I was late for the office or not and I wanted to do every one a kindness. I helped the little kids out of the tram. One little chap



dropped his cap, and when I picked it up for him and said, “Here, sonny!” . . . well, it was all I could do not to make a fool of myself.

At the office it was just the same. It seemed to me I’d never known the fellows at the office before. When old Fisher came over to my desk and put down a couple of giant sweet peas as per usual with his “Beat ’em, old man, beat ’em!”—I didn’t feel annoyed. I didn’t care that he was riddled with conceit about his garden. I just looked at them and I said quietly, “Yes, you’ve done it this time.” He didn’t know what to make of it. Came back in about five minutes and asked me if I had a headache.

And so it went on all day. In the evening I dashed home with the home-going crowd, pushed open the gate, saw the hall-door open as it always is and sat down on the little chair just inside to take off my boots. My slippers were there, of course. This seemed to me a good sign. I put my boots into the rack in the cupboard under the stairs, changed my office coat and made for the kitchen. I knew my wife was there. Wait a bit. The only thing I couldn’t manage was my whistling as per usual, “I often lie awake and think, What a dreadful thing is work. . . .” I had a try, but nothing came of it. Well, I opened the kitchen-door and said, “Hullo! How’s everybody?” But as soon as I’d said that—even before—I knew the worst had happened. She was standing at the table beating the salad dressing. And when she looked up and gave a kind of smile and said “Hullo!” you could have knocked me down! My wife looked dreadful—there’s no other word for it. She must have been crying all day. She’d put some white flour stuff on her face to take away the marks—but it only made her look worse. She must have seen I spotted something, for she caught up the cup of cream and poured some into the salad bowl—like she always does, you know, so quick, so neat, in her own way—and began beating again. I said, “Is your head better?” But she didn’t seem to hear. She said, “Are you going to water the garden before or after supper?” What could I say? I said, “After,” and went off to the dining-room, opened the evening paper and sat by the open window—well, hiding behind that paper, I suppose.

I shall never forget sitting there. People passing by, going down the road, sounded so peaceful. And a man passed with some cows. I—I envied him. My wife came in and out. Then she called me to supper and we sat down. I suppose we ate some cold meat and salad. I don’t remember. We must have. But neither of us spoke. It’s like a dream now. Then she got up, changed the plates, and went to the larder for the pudding. Do you know what the pudding was? Well, of course, it wouldn’t mean anything to you. It was my favourite—the kind she only made me on special occasions —honeycomb cream . . .

