



WIDOWED (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

They came down to breakfast next morning absolutely their own selves. Rosy, fresh, and just chilled enough by the cold air blowing through the bedroom windows to be very ready for hot coffee.

“Nippy.” That was Geraldine’s word as she buttoned on her orange coat with pink-washed fingers. “Don’t you find it decidedly nippy?” And her voice, so matter-of-fact, so natural, sounded as though they had been married for years.

Parting his hair with two brushes (marvellous feat for a woman to watch) in the little round mirror, he had replied, lightly clapping the brushes together, “My dear, have you got enough *on?*” and he, too, sounded as though well he knew from the experience of years her habit of clothing herself underneath in wisps of chiffon and two satin bows. . . . Then they ran down to breakfast, laughing together and terribly startling the shy parlour-maid who, after talking it over with Cook, had decided to be invisible until she was rung for.

“Good-morning, Nellie, I think we shall want more toast than *that*,” said the smiling Geraldine as she hung over the breakfast table. She deliberated— “Ask Cook to make us four more pieces, please.”

Marvellous, the parlour-maid thought it was. And as she closed the door she heard the voice say, “I do so hate to be short of toast, don’t you?”

He was standing in the sunny window. Geraldine went up to him. She put her hand on his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. How pleasant it was to feel that rough man’s tweed again. Ah, how pleasant! She rubbed her hand against it, touched it with her cheek, sniffed the smell.

The window looked out on to flower beds, a tangle of michaelmas daisies, late dahlias, hanging heavy, and shaggy little asters. Then there came a lawn strewn with yellow leaves with a broad path beyond and a row of gold-fluttering trees. An old gardener, in woollen mitts, was sweeping the path, brushing the leaves into a neat little heap. Now, the broom tucked in his arm, he fumbled in his coat pocket, brought out some matches, and scooping a hole in the leaves he set fire to them.

Such lovely blue smoke came breathing into the air through those dry leaves; there was something so calm and orderly in the way the pile burned that it was a pleasure to watch.



The old gardener stumped away and came back with a handful of withered twigs. He flung them on and stood by, and little light flames began to flicker.

“I do think,” said Geraldine, “I do think there is nothing nicer than a real satisfactory fire.”

“Jolly, isn’t it,” he murmured back, and they went to their first breakfast.

Just over a year ago, thirteen months, to be exact, she had been standing before the dining-room window of the little house in Sloane Street. It looked over the railed gardens. Breakfast was over, cleared away and done with . . . she had a fat bunch of letters in her hand that she meant to answer, snugly, over the fire. But before settling down, the autumn sun, the freshness had drawn her to the window. Such a perfect morning for the Row. Jimmie had gone riding.

“Goodbye, dear thing.”

“Goodbye, Gerry mine.” And then the morning kiss, quick and firm. He looked so handsome in his riding kit. She imagined him as she stood there . . . riding. Geraldine was not very good at imagining things. But there was mist, a thud of hooves and Jimmie’s moustache was damp. From the garden there sounded the creak of a gardener’s barrow. An old man came into sight with a load of leaves and a broom lying across. He stopped; he began to sweep. “What enormous tufts of irises grew in London gardens,” mused Geraldine. “Why?” And now the smoke of a real fire ascended.

“There is nothing nicer,” she thought, “than a really satisfactory fire.”

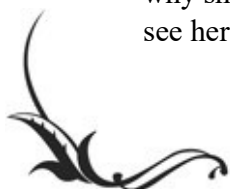
Just at that moment the telephone bell rang. Geraldine sat down at Jimmie’s desk to answer it. It was Major Hunter.

“Good morning, Major. You’re a very early bird!”

“Good morning, Mrs. Howard. Yes. I am.” (Geraldine made a little surprised face at herself. How odd he sounded!) “Mrs. Howard, I’m coming round to see you . . . now . . . I’m taking a taxi. . . . Please don’t go out. And—and—” the voice stammered, “p-please don’t let the servants go out.”

“*Par-don?*” This last was so very peculiar, though the whole thing had been peculiar enough, that Geraldine couldn’t believe what she heard. But he was gone. He had rung off. What on earth—and putting down the receiver, she took up a pencil and drew what she always drew when she sat down before a piece of blotting paper—the behind of a little cat with whiskers and tail complete. Geraldine must have drawn that little cat hundreds of times, all over the world, in hotels, in clubs, at steamer desks, waiting at the Bank. The little cat was her sign, her mark. She had copied it from a little girl at school when she thought it most wonderful. And she never tried anything else. She was . . . not very good at drawing. This particular cat was drawn with an extra firm pen and even its whiskers looked surprised.

“Not to let the servants go out!” But she had never heard anything so peculiar in her life. She must have made a mistake. Geraldine couldn’t help a little giggle of amusement. And why should he tell her he was taking a taxi? And why—above all—should he be coming to see her at that hour of the morning?



Then—it came over her—like a flash she remembered Major Hunter’s mania for old furniture. They had been discussing it at the Carlton the last time they lunched together. And he had said something to Jimmie about some—Jacobean or Queen Anne—Geraldine knew nothing about these things—something or other. Could he possibly be bringing it round? But of course. He must be. And that explained the remark about the servants. He wanted them to help getting it into the house. What a bore! Geraldine did hope it would tone in. And really, she must say she thought Major Hunter was taking a good deal for granted to produce a thing that size at that hour of the day without a word of warning. They hardly knew him well enough for that. Why make such a mystery of it too? Geraldine hated mysteries. But she had heard his head was rather troublesome at times ever since the Somme affair. Perhaps this was one of his bad days. In that case, a pity Jimmie was not back. She rang. Mullins answered.

“Oh, Mullins, I’m expecting Major Hunter in a few moments. He’s bringing something rather heavy. He may want you to help with it. And Cook had better be ready, too.”

Geraldine’s manner was slightly lofty with her servants. She enjoyed carrying things off with a high hand. All the same Mullins did look surprised. She seemed to hover for a moment before she went out. It annoyed Geraldine greatly. What was there to be surprised at? What could have been simpler? she thought, sitting down to her batch of letters, and the fire, and the clock and her pen began to whisper together.

There was the taxi—making an enormous noise at the door. She thought she heard the driver’s voice, too, arguing. It took her a long moment to clasp her writing case and to get up out of the low chair. The bell rang. She went straight to the dining-room door——

And there was Major Hunter in his riding kit, coming quickly towards her, and behind him, through the open door at the bottom of the steps she saw something big, something grey. It was an ambulance.

“There’s been an accident,” cried Geraldine sharply.

“Mrs. Howard.” Major Hunter ran forward. He put out his icy cold hand and wrung hers. “You’ll be brave, won’t you?” he said, he pleaded.

But of course she would be brave.

“Is it serious?”

Major Hunter nodded gravely. He said the one word “Yes.”

“Very serious?”

Now he raised his head. He looked her full in the eyes. She’d never realized until that moment that he was extraordinarily handsome though in a melodrama kind of way. “It’s as bad as it can be, Mrs. Howard,” said Major Hunter simply. “But—go in there,” he said hastily and he almost pushed her into her own dining-room. “We must bring him in—where can we——”

“Can he be taken upstairs?” asked Geraldine.



“Yes, yes of course.” Major Hunter looked at her so strangely—so painfully.

“There’s his dressing-room,” said Geraldine. “It’s on the first floor. I’ll lead the way,” and she put her hand on the Major’s arm. “It’s quite all right, Major,” she said, “I’m not going to break down—” and she actually smiled, a confident brilliant smile.

To her amazement as Major Hunter turned away he burst out with, “Ah, my God! I’m so sorry.”

Poor man. He was quite overcome. “Brandy afterwards,” thought Geraldine. “Not now, of course.”

It was a painful moment when she heard those measured deliberate steps in the hall. But Geraldine, realizing this was not the moment, and there was nothing to be gained by it, refrained from looking.

“This way, Major.” She skimmed on in front, up the stairs, along the passage; she flung open the door of Jimmie’s gay living breathing, dressing-room and stood to one side—for Major Hunter, for the two stretcher-bearers. Only then she realized that it must be a scalp wound—some injury to the head. For there was nothing to be seen of Jimmie; the sheet was pulled right over . . .

