

## 1    **THE FLY**        *by Katherine Mansfield*

2    'Y'ARE VERY SNUG in here,' piped old Mr. Woodifield, and peered out of the great,  
3    green-leather armchair by his friend the boss's desk as a baby peers out of its  
4    pram. His talk was over; it was time for him to be off. But he did not want to go.  
5    Since he had retired, since his... stroke, the wife and the girls kept him boxed up in  
6    the house every day of the week except Tuesday. On Tuesday he was dressed  
7    and brushed and allowed to cut back to the City for the day. Though what he did  
8    there the wife and girls couldn't imagine. Made a nuisance of himself to his friends,  
9    they supposed....Well, perhaps so. All the same, we cling to our last pleasures as  
10   the tree clings to its last leaves. So there sat old Woodifield, smoking a cigar and  
11   staring almost greedily at the boss, who rolled in his office chair, stout, rosy, five  
12   years older than he, and still going strong, still at the helm. It did one good to see  
13   him.

14   Wistfully, admiringly, the old voice added, 'It's snug in here, upon my word!'

15   'Yes, it's comfortable enough,' agreed the boss, and he flipped the Financial Times  
16   with a paper-knife. As a matter of fact he was proud of his room; he liked to have it  
17   admired, especially by old Woodifield. It gave him a feeling of deep, solid  
18   satisfaction to be planted there in the midst of it in full view of that frail old figure in  
19   the muffler.

20   'I've had it done up lately,' he explained, as he had explained for the past - how  
21   many! - weeks. 'New carpet,' and he pointed to the bright red carpet with a pattern  
22   of large white rings. 'New furniture,' and he nodded towards the massive bookcase  
23   and the table with legs like twisted treacle. 'Electric heating!' He waved almost  
24   exultantly towards the five transparent, pearly sausages glowing so softly in the  
25   tilted copper pan.

26   But he did not draw old Woodifield's attention to the photograph over the table of a  
27   grave-looking boy in uniform standing in one of those spectral photographers'  
28   parks with photographers' storm-clouds behind him. It was not new. It had been  
29   there for over six years.

30   'There was something I wanted to tell you,' said old Woodifield, and his eyes grew  
31   dim remembering. 'Now what was it? I had it in my mind when I started out this  
32   morning.' His hands began to tremble, and patches of red showed above his beard.

33   Poor old chap, he's on his last pins, thought the boss. And, feeling kindly, he  
34   winked at the old man, and said jokingly, 'I tell you what. I've got a little drop of  
35   something here that'll do you good before you go out into the cold again. It's  
36   beautiful stuff. It wouldn't hurt a child.' He took a key off his watch-chain, unlocked  
37   a cupboard below his desk, and drew forth a dark, squat bottle. 'That's the

1 medicine,' said he.'And the man from whom I got it told me on the strict Q.T. it  
2 came from the cellars at Windsor Castle.'

3 Old Woodifield's mouth fell open at the sight. He couldn't have looked more  
4 surprised if the boss had produced a rabbit. 'It's whisky, ain't it?' he piped feebly.

5 The boss turned the bottle and lovingly showed him the label. Whisky it was.

6 'D'you know,' said he, peering up at the boss wonderingly, 'they won't let me touch  
7 it at home.' And he looked as though he was going to cry.

8 'Ah, that's where we know a bit more than the ladies,' cried the boss, swooping  
9 across for two tumblers that stood on the table with the water-bottle, and pouring a  
10 generous finger into each. 'Drink it down. It'll do you good. And don't put any water  
11 with it. It's sacrilege to tamper with stuff like this. Ah!' He tossed off his, pulled out  
12 his handkerchief, hastily wiped his moustaches, and cocked an eye at old  
13 Woodifield, who was rolling his in his chaps.

14 The old man swallowed, was silent a moment, and then said faintly, 'It's nutty!'

15 But it warmed him; it crept into his chill old brain - he remembered.

16 'That was it,' he said, heaving himself out of his chair. 'I thought you'd like to know.  
17 The girls were in Belgium last week having a look at poor Reggie's grave, and they  
18 happened to come across your boy's. They're quite near each other, it seems.

19 Old Woodifield paused, but the boss made no reply. Only a quiver in his eyelids  
20 showed that he heard.

21 'The girls were delighted with the way the place is kept,' piped the old voice.  
22 'Beautifully looked after. Couldn't be better if they were at home. You've not been  
23 across, have yer?'

24 'No, no!' For various reasons the boss had not been across.

25 'There's miles of it,' quavered old Woodifield, 'and it's all as neat as a garden.  
26 Flowers growing on all the graves. Nice broad paths.' It was plain from his voice  
27 how much he liked a nice broad path.

28 The pause came again. Then the old man brightened wonderfully.

29 'D'you know what the hotel made the girls pay for a pot of jam?' he piped. 'Ten  
30 francs! Robbery, I call it. It was a little pot, so Gertrude says, no bigger than a half-  
31 crown. And she hadn't taken more than a spoonful when they charged her ten

1 francs. Gertrude brought the pot away with her to teach 'em a lesson. Quite right,  
2 too; it's trading on our feelings. They think because we're over there having a look  
3 round we're ready to pay anything. That's what it is.' And he turned towards the  
4 door.

5 'Quite right, quite right!' cried the boss, though what was quite right he hadn't the  
6 least idea. He came round by his desk, followed the shuffling footsteps to the door,  
7 and saw the old fellow out. Woodifield was gone.

8 For a long moment the boss stayed, staring at nothing, while the grey-haired office  
9 messenger, watching him, dodged in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that  
10 expects to be taken for a run. Then: 'I'll see nobody for half an hour, Macey,' said  
11 the boss. 'Understand! Nobody at all.'

12 'Very good, sir.'

13 The door shut, the firm heavy steps recrossed the bright carpet, the fat body  
14 plumped down in the spring chair, and leaning forward, the boss covered his face  
15 with his hands. He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep....

16 It had been a terrible shock to him when old Woodifield sprang that remark upon  
17 him about the boy's grave. It was exactly as though the earth had opened and he  
18 had seen the boy lying there with Woodifield's girls staring down at him. For it was  
19 strange. Although over six years had passed away, the boss never thought of the  
20 boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep for ever. 'My  
21 son!' groaned the boss. But no tears came yet. In the past, in the first months and  
22 even years after the boy's death, he had only to say those words to be overcome  
23 by such grief that nothing short of a violent fit of weeping could relieve him. Time,  
24 he had declared then, he had told everybody, could make no difference. Other men  
25 perhaps might recover, might live their loss down, but not he. How was it possible!  
26 His boy was an only son. Ever since his birth the boss had worked at building up  
27 this business for him; it had no other meaning if it was not for the boy. Life itself  
28 had come to have no other meaning. How on earth could he have slaved, denied  
29 himself, kept going all those years without the promise for ever before him of the  
30 boy's stepping into his shoes and carrying on where he left off?

31 And that promise had been so near being fulfilled. The boy had been in the office  
32 learning the ropes for a year before the war. Every morning they had started off  
33 together; they had come back by the same train. And what congratulations he had  
34 received as the boy's father! No wonder; he had taken to it marvellously. As to his  
35 popularity with the staff, every man jack of them down to old Macey couldn't make  
36 enough of the boy. And he wasn't in the least spoilt. No, he was just his bright  
37 natural self, with the right word for everybody, with that boyish look and his habit of  
38 saying, 'Simply splendid!'

1 But all that was over and done with as though it never had been. The day had  
2 come when Macey had handed him the telegram that brought the whole place  
3 crashing about his head. 'Deeply regret to inform you...' And he had left the office a  
4 broken man, with his life in ruins.

5 Six years ago, six years.... How quickly time passed! It might have happened  
6 yesterday. The boss took his hands from his face; he was puzzled. Something  
7 seemed to be wrong with him. He wasn't feeling as he wanted to feel. He decided  
8 to get up and have a look at the boy's photograph. But it wasn't a favourite  
9 photograph of his; the expression was unnatural. It was cold, even stern-looking.  
10 The boy had never looked like that.

11 At that moment the boss noticed that a fly had fallen into his broad inkpot, and was  
12 trying feebly but desperately to clamber out again. Help! Help! said those struggling  
13 legs. But the sides of the inkpot were wet and slippery; it fell back again and began  
14 to swim. The boss took up a pen, picked the fly out of the ink, and shook it on to a  
15 piece of blotting-paper. For a fraction of a second it lay still on the dark patch that  
16 oozed round it. Then the front legs waved, took hold, and, pulling its small, sodden  
17 body up, it began the immense task of cleaning the ink from its wings. Over and  
18 under, over and under, went a leg along a wing as the stone goes over and under  
19 the scythe. Then there was a pause, while the fly, seeming to stand on the tips of  
20 its toes, tried to expand first one wing and then the other. It succeeded at last, and,  
21 sitting down, it began, like a minute cat, to clean its face. Now one could imagine  
22 that the little front legs rubbed against each other lightly, joyfully. The horrible  
23 danger was over; it had escaped; it was ready for life again.

24 But just then the boss had an idea. He plunged his pen back into the ink, leaned  
25 his thick wrist on the blotting-paper, and as the fly tried its wings down came a  
26 great heavy blot. What would it make of that! What indeed! The little beggar  
27 seemed absolutely cowed, stunned, and afraid to move because of what would  
28 happen next. But then, as if painfully, it dragged itself forward. The front legs  
29 waved, caught hold, and, more slowly this time, the task began from the beginning.

30 He's a plucky little devil, thought the boss, and he felt a real admiration for the fly's  
31 courage. That was the way to tackle things; that was the right spirit. Never say die;  
32 it was only a question of... But the fly had again finished its laborious task, and the  
33 boss had just time to refill his pen, to shake fair and square on the new-cleaned  
34 body yet another dark drop. What about it this time? A painful moment of suspense  
35 followed. But behold, the front legs were again waving; the boss felt a rush of relief.  
36 He leaned over the fly and said to it tenderly, 'You artful little b...' And he actually  
37 had the brilliant notion of breathing on it to help the drying process. All the same,  
38 there was something timid and weak about its efforts now, and the boss decided  
39 that this time should be the last, as he dipped the pen deep into the inkpot.

1 It was. The last blot fell on the soaked blotting-paper, and the draggled fly lay in it  
2 and did not stir. The back legs were stuck to the body; the front legs were not to be  
3 seen.

4 'Come on,' said the boss. 'Look sharp!' And he stirred it with his pen--in vain.  
5 Nothing happened or was likely to happen. The fly was dead.

6 The boss lifted the corpse on the end of the paper-knife and flung it into the waste-  
7 paper basket. But such a grinding feeling of wretchedness seized him that he felt  
8 positively frightened. He started forward and pressed the bell for Macey.

9 'Bring me some fresh blotting-paper,' he said sternly, 'and look sharp about it.' And  
10 while the old dog padded away he fell to wondering what it was he had been  
11 thinking about before. What was it? It was... He took out his handkerchief and  
12 passed it inside his collar. For the life of him he could not remember.

13 **THE END**