

ELSIE LINDTNER

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Elsie Lindtner by Karin Michaëlis

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KARIN MICHAËLIS

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AUTHORISED TRANSLATION

BY BEATRICE MARSHALL



LONDON JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD
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PREFACE

READERS and admirers of "The Dangerous Age"—and their name is legion—will find themselves perfectly at home in the following story. To them, Elsie Lindtner's rambling aphorisms, her revelations of "naked soul," the remarkably frank letters which she delights to write to her friends, among whom she numbers her divorced husband ; above all, her rather preposterous obsession with regard to the dangers of middle age, will be familiar as a twice-told tale.

Doubtless many will be charmed to meet Elsie Lindtner again, when she has passed through the dreaded furnace of her forties, and is still keeping the spark of inextinguishable youthfulness alive within her, by gambling at Monte Carlo, travelling in Greece with Jeanne of the flaming hair,

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fencing in London, riding in New York, and finally finding happiness and salvation in the adoption of a small offscouring of the streets. But for those who may have missed reading the little masterpiece of modern femininity which only a short time ago set a whole continent by the ears, some sort of key is, possibly, necessary to the enjoyment of "Elsie Lindtner."

In "The Dangerous Age" Elsie Lindtner writes an autobiographical letter to Joergen Malthe, the rising young architect, who has been her ardent admirer. She tells him that her mother died when she was born, and her father was bankrupt, and lived disgraced in retirement, while she was left to the care of a servant girl. From her she learnt that lack of money was the cause of their sordid life, and from that moment she worshipped money.

"I sometimes buried a coin that had been given me," she writes, "as a dog buries a bone."

When she went to school little Elsbeth

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Bugge was soon informed that she was "the prettiest girl in the school"; that a pretty face was worth a fortune.

"From that moment I entered upon the accursed cult of my person which absorbed the rest of my childhood and all my first youth. . . . I avoided the sun lest I should get freckles; I collected rain water for washing; I slept in gloves, and though I adored sweets, I refrained from eating them on account of my teeth. I spent hours brushing my hair."

One day when she came home she found the only big mirror in the house had been transferred from her father's room and hung in her own.

"I made myself quite ill with excitement, and the maid had to put me to bed. But later on, when the house was quiet, I got up and lit my lamp. I spent hours gazing at myself in the glass. There I sat till the sun rose."

Then follows an account of how this child, scarcely in her teens, positively set her cap

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at a rich, elderly widower, because he had a fine house.

"My brain reeled as I said to myself, 'Some day I will live in that house as wife of the Chief Magistrate.'"

The precociousness of Marie Bashkertseff who fell in love with a duke when she ought to have been playing with her dolls, pales into insignificance beside this confession.

Elsie left school and went back to Denmark engaged to Herr von Brincken, the Chief Magistrate. In vain she strived to conquer—or at least to hide—the physical repulsion she felt for this man. At last it was plain to him, and he broke off the engagement. To Elsie's father he excused himself on the plea of heart disease; to Elsie he wrote "You will understand why I give a fictitious reason to your father and to the world in general. I should be committing a moral murder were I to marry you under the circumstances. My love for you, great as it is, is not great enough

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to conquer your youth." And so she married Richard Lindtner, a wealthy Dane, and made her home with him in the Old Market Place at Copenhagen, where for twenty-two years she was, to outward appearances, a happy and contented wife.

"I allowed my senses to be inflamed while my mind remained cold and my heart contracted with disgust. I consciously profaned the sacred words of love by applying them to a man whom I chose for his money. Meanwhile, I developed into the frivolous society woman everybody took me to be. Every woman wears the mask which best suits her purpose. My mask was my smile. . . ."

It is only in this book, the second instalment of Elsie Lindtner's fragmentary diary and correspondence, that she gives us a reason for leaving her husband after twenty-two years of married life, the wish that he should have children. In "The Dangerous Age" she hints at other and various reasons. To her friend and cousin,