

THE ART OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

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KATHERINE MANSFIELD was the pen-name of Kathleen Beauchamp. She was born in 1888, at Wellington, New Zealand. Her parents were fairly well-to-do. Her father is set down in *Who's Who* as a banker; he was knighted, as colonial bankers of importance frequently are. The family had lived "down under" three generations. Her mother was delicate, and finally succumbed of heart failure in 1918. Of the immediate family her mother would seem to have been the only one of spiritual kinship with Kathleen, this kinship being shown in a certain Puckish humour and liveliness. But the one in the family of sympathetic feelings with Kathleen was her only brother, younger than herself, who was killed a week or so after he went to the French front in 1915. Ability runs in the larger family connection, however. The Countess Russell, whose pen-name is "Elizabeth", is a cousin of Kathleen Beauchamp. It is of importance to mention these matters, for there is a rebellion against convention and the hum-drum that runs all through her writing. This is coupled with extreme and tender affection, and a desire to be at peace with, and in love with, all the world. Still it is there. She is bored to death with the trivialities that make up the lives of most people. She is tortured by ugliness, no matter how virtuous it may be; and she loathes selfishness. These qualities are part of the price which an artistic soul must pay to life.

During her early childhood the family lived in the country, where the village school was attended by all sorts, and where there were no "building restrictions" to separate villadom from slums. (*The Doll's House*, and *The Garden Party* reflect this society.) When she was only nine years old, she found herself in print. At a fairly early age also, she showed a passion for music, and some ability to perform on the piano. I cannot discover whether she drew well, but she was fond of drawing, and greatly interested in painting always. I mention these things only because they are of importance in the appreciation of her writing, which shows at all points a great awareness of both eye and ear, and indeed an extreme development of all the senses. Extreme development

of the senses, it may also be noted, is generally an indication of delicate health; and unfortunately it is fairly obvious, from the published records at our disposal at least, that the family seems to have been pretty careless about the health and happiness of their promising child. At the age of thirteen she was sent to London to be educated at Queen's College, and she remained there five years. I have no means of knowing what sort of physical life she led during these important years. At college she was taught music, and made great progress with the violincello. She seems to have been well taught in English Literature, and became fairly proficient in French and German. But what sort of meals and living quarters she had during these five years, I cannot find out. Again, how did she spend her Christmas holidays and long vacations? I do not know. We do know that the damp climate of London did not agree with her; and that she early had symptoms of a delicate heart, and rheumatism. At the same time, as she has left on record, the windows that gave out on London were enchanting to her. It was a world of wonder.

Accordingly, at the age of eighteen she went back to New Zealand most reluctantly. The only thing in Wellington that seemed to her to matter was a family of musicians, to whom she became attached. Unfortunately these friends soon moved to London. She went on a camping trip in the New Zealand wilds, soon after this. Perhaps it was now, with a fairly mature eye, that she saw something of the seamy side of New Zealand life, reflected in *The Woman at the Store*, and *Ole Underwood*; but this is mere surmise on my part. Of one thing we are certain—her life between eighteen and twenty was one of infinite discontent. "Aunt Beryl" of the *Prelude* and *At the Bay* is herself; she has also put a good deal of these years into *The Daughters of the Late Colonel*. Finally her parents consented to her return to London. But she was given only a small allowance.

In 1864, a young man named Samuel Butler had returned from New Zealand to London. He also had shown some proficiency in the three arts of writing, painting and music. He settled down intending to become a painter, and it was only after a long period, and then partly by accident, that he discovered that writing was his real bent. Kathleen Beauchamp was still only twenty when she abandoned music for literature. Her allowance was not enough for her to live on, and we are told that "she had varied and exacting experiences in minor parts in travelling opera companies and the like". This year made a profound impression on her: poverty, hunger and blank despair are very real things in her subsequent

writing. But she found her experiences very amusing too; and to the end of her life she was fond of capping domestic tribulations by the curiously unforgettable tags of the music halls, such as:

I put more white-wash on the old woman's face
Than I did on the garden wall.

Nor were her troubles over when an editor did accept her. As others have discovered, getting into print in London is one thing, and to make a living by writing is another. Her health broke down. I imagine that relatives, whether her own family or not, now came to her assistance. At all events she was able to go to Germany when convalescent. Here she continued to write, and her sketches of life in Germany became her first book, which was published in 1911, when she was 23. The book, of which she was afterwards heartily ashamed, met with a great success, and ran to three editions. But her publisher was bankrupt, and her gross receipts from it amounted to only £15.

At the end of 1911 she met a very precocious young man, J. Middleton Murry, who was later to become her husband. Murry was slightly younger than herself; still an undergraduate at Oxford, but already an editor, and already recognized as a critic by the late Sir Walter Raleigh, at that time head of the School of English Literature in Oxford. He rapidly became a prolific writer and editor, but was curiously unable to make money. The records that we have show him to have been an exceedingly impractical person, at least at this period. So far as her literary career went, Kathleen Beauchamp might have fallen in with a more fortunate editor and collaborator. On the other hand, Murry believed in her ability when few were found to do so, and their marriage, which took place in 1913, was a very happy one. The paper which he edited came to an end in that year. For nearly two years, until D. H. Lawrence and Murry edited a new little magazine, no editor would accept anything she wrote. This magazine ran for only two months, during 1915. Then, in the year 1918, she had three stories accepted again. When one remembers that before this time "Katherine Mansfield" had already written the little idyll, *Something Childish but very Natural*, *Prelude*, and several little masterpieces such as *Carnation*, and that they were offered to editor after editor with no success whatever, one sees that she had need of some real backing and encouragement. Moreover there is no doubt that her young husband gave her something much harder to come by even than encouragement: that is, real criticism. This he was well qualified to do. Her gifts were of

course native and absolutely original; but in comparison with the graduate of Queen's College, Harley St., the young man who was selected by Raleigh to lecture to the English School at Oxford was, of course, a person of extraordinary and profound education and literary judgment. In a minor way it was one of those literary partnerships that have been so fruitful in modern times.

But it was also exceedingly unfortunate that so delicate a creature had to live in penury. Until September, 1916, when Murry got his first regular job—an appointment at the War Office in London—the struggle for a living had been intense. To cope with rheumatism and general ill-health, Katherine Mansfield had to spend winters in Paris and the South of France. The War was on: in France living was something of a difficulty, even for the robust. Besides, in addition to the loss of her brother, and of every single male friend who went to serve, the War horrified her sensitive spirit. In November, 1917, while living in England, she took pleurisy, not for the first time. It became lingering consumption. She made a courageous struggle, not so much for life, as for a continuance, or rather for the perfection, of her writing. She lived more than five years, and wrote almost to the last.

Her husband became editor of the *Athenaeum* in 1919, and so was able to bring her work before the public once more. In the interval some of her stories had been privately printed, and had attracted the attention of a few discerning people. She had had for years a small circle of very intimate friends, consisting chiefly of artists and writers, and including many of the most famous men and women now writing. In 1920 publishers began to seek her out. The collection of stories called *Bliss*, which contained *Prelude*, then appeared, and she became, if not famous, at least known to all educated people on both sides of the Atlantic. But by this time she was rapidly becoming an invalid, seeking health in France, Italy, Switzerland. Some of her best work was still to be done, however. In the spring of 1922 she published *The Garden Party and other Stories*, which won the praise of Hardy, and completely established her reputation. She was now very ill, but continued writing, and completed several perfect little stories, including *The Doll's House*, *The Fly*, and *The Canary*. In October of this year she went to live with a Russian community near Paris. Her husband went to stay with her there at the end of the year. She died January 9, 1923.

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What I should like to do is to call attention to the artistry of Katherine Mansfield. Comparisons are not very useful in

literary criticism; genius is a word that is used overmuch, perhaps. There are many great writers in our time, no doubt,—many of whom, possibly, I have not read; I merely wish to record a private conviction: that, aside from the giant, Thomas Hardy, I somehow feel surer of the *art* of Katherine Mansfield than I do of any other recent writer of English fiction. In her work, I admit, I have preferences. Middleton Murry, of course, has written that all of her work is important, and has announced his intention of publishing every scrap she has written—even first drafts; but he too distinguishes between her “finest stories” and the others. Many, however, have denounced his publication of fragments, and of earlier pieces; and others have denounced the publication of the *Journal* and the *Letters*. I do not intend to enter into that dispute, except to say that I have found the *Letters* a very “human document” as Carlyle might put it, and I think they will be as famous as any letters in the language. My chief contention is, however, that the *Letters*, *Bliss*, *The Garden Party*, all contain some of this perfectly artistic writing, and indeed in the two posthumous volumes published by her husband, *The Dove's Nest*, 1923, and *Something Childish*, 1924—though they contain much that might have been omitted, in my judgment, and much which, as Mr. Murry himself says, Katherine Mansfield would never have allowed to be published—there is some exceedingly fine, artistic writing.

What is Art? Many great thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Benedetto Croce, have attempted to answer the question. Katherine Mansfield herself, as the *Journal* and the *Letters* show, often busied herself with it. Definitions of these ultimate things can never be satisfactory: one works in a circle, and sometimes obscures the truth merely, as Samuel Butler complained, when he defined Definition itself as “a wall of words around a wilderness of ideas”. But for our purpose, perhaps, we need not attempt anything too philosophic or too exact. Perhaps it will be more modest and safer to begin with what others have said, and adapt these things to our present theme. Plato said that the poet, being magnetised by God, magnetised his reciters, who in turn magnetised their audiences. Aristotle, asking why tragedy, which deals with painful subjects, is still pleasing to those who witness it, said that all men are naturally imitative, so far as they can be, and take pleasure in imitation, and that while their emotions are stirred by the scenes in a tragedy, they yet take pleasure in recognising the perfection of the tragic writer's imitation of life, and exclaim mentally: “That is it, to the life!” In its implications, Hegel's famous definition of Art as “Matter

utterly permeated by mind" comes to pretty much the same as this. Croce lays emphasis on the creative side of Art, and points out that a perfect work of art causes those who hear it or see it also to create, with something of the original freshness and pleasure. This reminds one of Plato's metaphor. Now, one may prefer one of these conceptions, or the other,—or possibly find it interesting and instructive to accept them all. They are, all of them, inadequate explanations; for no explanation of such a thing can be adequate. But they are figures of speech, each illustrating different elements of the same truth. They all postulate, it seems to me, an ideal or mental world into which the artist enters and into which he can introduce others. Aristotle calls the process imitative and Croce calls it creative, but in a way this is a mere difference of terminology, for the artist imitates objects merely to create types. It is important to observe also that all these definitions presuppose that art gives pleasure or joy. It is conceived of as divine magnetism, or instinctive human pleasure, or as a triumph of mind, or as a joy of creating and re-creating. If the work under consideration is painful, or even dull, it cannot be called art. If writing or drawing, or a statue, represent—or cause in the reader or spectator—anything of a painful character, it is dealing with the momentary passion, as the Greeks would say, and not with the abiding character, which is the realm of art. Lessing has much to say on this head; and every one is familiar with Wordsworth's dictum: "Emotion remembered in tranquillity."

Let us listen to Katherine Mansfield herself on this subject. She approaches the subject more concretely, and at the same time in a more pedestrian way, in her *Letters*,—for her *Letters* to her friends are exceedingly humorous, and not aesthetic disquisitions. For the ordinary person she may be easier to understand than the great pundits.

In a letter to a friend, dated August, 1917, we read:

I've been sitting at this table since morning, writing and smoking. And somewhere quite near someone is playing very old-fashioned dance tunes on the piano, things like the Lancers, you know. Some minute part of me not only dances to them, but goes faithfully through, Ladies in the Centre, Visiting, Set to Corners; and I can even feel the sensation of clasping young warm hands in white silk gloves, and shrinking from Maggie Owen's hand in Ladies Chain, because she wore no glove at all.

In a letter soon afterwards, to an artist friend (who was deaf, by the way, and used an ear trumpet):

You are painting still lives just now. What can one do, faced with the wonderful tumble of round bright fruits at this season (it was October) but gather them and play with them; and become them, as it were? When I pass an apple stall, I cannot help stopping and staring until I feel that I, myself, am changing into an apple too, and that any moment I can produce an apple miraculously out of my own being, like the conjuror producing the egg. When you paint apples do you feel that your breasts and your knees become apples too? Or do you think this is the greatest nonsense? I don't. I am sure it is not. When I write about ducks (she is busy at the time with *Prelude*) I swear that I am a white duck, with a round eye, floating on a pond with yellow blobs, and taking an occasional dart at the other duck with a round eye which floats upside down beneath me. In fact, the whole process of becoming the duck (what Lawrence would probably call the consummation with the duck or the apple!) is so thrilling that I can hardly breathe, only to think of it. For, although that is as far as most people get, it is really only the "prelude" (She is punning on her own title). There follows the moment when you are *more* duck, *more* apple, or *more* Natasha than any of these objects could ever possibly be, and so you create them anew.

The letter then continues dramatically, with directions:

Brett (switching off the instrument¹) Katherine, I beg of you to stop. You must tell us all about it at the Brotherhood Church one Sunday evening.

Here is an account to her husband (Feb. 10, 1918) of the composition of the beautiful little story called *Sun and Moon*:

I dreamed a short story last night, even down to its name, which was *Sun and Moon*. It was very light. I dreamed it all—about children. I got up at 6.30 and wrote a note or two, because I knew it would fade. I'll send it some time this week. It's so nice. I didn't dream that I read it. No, I was in it, part of it, and it played round invisible me. But the hero is not more than *five*. In my dream I saw a supper table with the eyes of *five*. It was awfully queer—especially a plate of half-melted ice-cream.

Similarly, in a letter to her husband November, 1920, she gives some account of *The Stranger*, a story which I have many times re-read, for its peculiar success in entering into the *male* mind:

Here is it under my hand, finished, another story. It is called *The Stranger*, a "New Zealand" story. My depression has gone, so it was just this. And now it's here, thank God—and

1. i. e. the ear trumpet.

the fire burns, and it's warm, and, though the wind is howling—it can howl! What a QUEER business writing is! I don't know. I don't believe other people are ever as foolishly excited as I am while I'm working. How could they be? Writers would have to live in trees. I've been this man, been this woman! I've stood for hours on the Auckland wharf. I've been out in the stream, waiting to be berthed—I've been a seagull hovering at the stern, and a hotel porter whistling through his teeth. It isn't as though one sits and watches the spectacle. That would be thrilling enough, God knows. But one IS the spectacle for the time. If one remained oneself all the time like some writers can, it would be a bit less exhausting. It's a lightning change tho'!

In a passage in the private journal she notes the extreme vividness with which she sees things (*Journal*, p. 133):

It often happens to me now, that when I lie down to sleep at night, instead of getting drowsy, I feel more wakeful, and lying here in bed, I begin to live over scenes from real life, or imaginary scenes. It's not too much to say they are almost hallucinations; they are marvellously vivid. I lie on my right side and put my left hand up to my forehead, as though I were praying. This seems to induce the state. Then, for instance, it is 10.30 p. m. on a big liner in mid-ocean. People are beginning to leave the Ladies' Cabin. Father puts his head in, and asks: 'If one of you would care for a walk before you turn in? It's glorious up on deck.' That begins it. I am *there*. Details: father rubbing his gloves, the cold air,—the night air, the pattern of everything, the feel of the brass stair-rail, and the rubber stairs. Then the deck—the pause while the cigar is lighted, the look of all in the moonlight, the *steadying* hum of the ship, the first officer on deck, so far aloft the bells, the steward going into the smoking-room with a tray, stepping over the high, brass-bound step. All these things are far realer, more in detail, richer than life. And I believe I could go on till—there's no end to it!

I can do this about everything. Only there are no personalities. Neither am I there, personally. People are only part of the silence, not of the pattern,—vastly different from that—part of the scheme. I could always do this to a certain extent; but it's only since I was really ill that this—shall we call it 'consolation prize'? has been given to me. My God, it's a marvellous thing.

But this is only theory after all: what does it come to in writing? What is the perfection of Art like in literature? What distinguishes it from the less perfect? China and Hellas, ancient Egypt and modern Russia, Chaucer and Hardy—these, in the nature of things, are very different, bound to be very different. Yet in each case we can use the word Art. Waley has translated a poem by an old Chinese writer as follows:—

All night I could not sleep
 Because of the moonlight on my bed.
 I kept on hearing a voice calling;
 Out of darkness nothing answered: "Yes".

Undoubtedly he has changed the poem greatly in translating, as I must change when I translate from Sappho:

Thou too in death shalt lie, one day
 Thyself forgotten then, and aye,
 Since thou plucks't not the Muses' vine,
 Shalt flit unfamed where shadows pine.

The subjects are different; the treatment is different; and yet even in tortured translations the "still, sad music of humanity" is caught for every human reader, whether ancient or modern, Oriental or European. The most praised work in Attic tragedy, in ancient times, was the *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles. Its trappings seem remote to us to-day; it is connected with minute bits of Greek topography, with all the lumber of oracles, with ancient taboos, and with the accident that in prehistoric times Phoenician traders had brought Semitic art to Thebes, and so created a legend of a Sphynx. And yet the scene where the Theban King, having discovered his incest, and blinded himself in remorse, says farewell to the children which are his own and his mother's, is still, for the modern reader, one of the most perfect things in literature, whether it be read in a study-chair or on a desolate sea-shore. Why? It is a grim and even sordid scene, quite as grim and sordid as an account of the Assizes in Hastings County, Ontario, which I remember reading some years ago, and which dealt with a similar situation. But the one was a mere newspaper tale of horror, which one flung down, revolted; and the other is Art, which by some miracle gives us intense pleasure; rousing in us pity, it is true, as the ancient critic said; but releasing our spirit with "thoughts that wander through eternity", and making us aware of Beauty, even in the grime and anguish of life.

I do not think we can come much closer to it than this, by any definition or analysis. The perfect artists in writing make us aware of Beauty in a peculiarly vivid way; they remove every clog, somehow, to our imagination; they know precisely what strokes to give the picture, to awaken us above and beyond the real, to a created world, in whose creation they allow us to participate. Of all the possible things that might be said, they know, above all, *what things to select for saying*; and they contrive to say them in such a way as to make us forget themselves and forget ourselves; to make us forget the printed page, and the room in which we sit.

The crowning marvel of it is that they deal neither with hallucinations nor with individual things. They deal with human life, the real thing; and they deal with it universally. And, finally, the marvel is marvellously beautiful. Whether they speak of reeds on a Chinese river, or the Pierian spring, or the pitcher "broken at the fountain" in Jerusalem, or a sleigh-drive through a Russian forest by night,—they open a chink through which our minds love to steal, and cause us to exclaim, as Katherine Mansfield exclaims in her *Journal*: "The lovely world—God, how lovely the external world is!" The less perfect artists fail to be so vivid; they do kindle our imagination to a certain extent, but they trip over something occasionally, and remind us of themselves; they do not know what things to put in, and what things to leave out (generally they put in too much); sometimes they don't quite make their subject universal. For example: Shakespeare takes a classical theme, and by absolutely making it himself, makes it for *all* men; whereas Ben Johnson is a seventeenth century Englishman, who has studied the classics. Often again, they fail in Beauty: they do not delight us with the loveliness of the world.

In this sense, then, I find Katherine Mansfield a greater artist than almost any of the writers of English fiction in recent times.

The New Zealand stories are best,—above all, *Prelude*, *At the Bay*, *The Garden Party*. But they include some slighter things, like the *The Kidnapping of Pearl Button*, *The Ideal Family*, *The Wind Blows*, *New Dresses*, etc., etc. As she says, somewhere in her *Journal*, she can never live long enough to exhaust New Zealand! There it was, the place she hated so, when she found at 18 that she had to go back to it; its Sabbatarianism, its intolerance, its remoteness from music and art and life, its general provincialism; there it was with its cramped domestic atmosphere—"shut up in families to tread on one another's toes." But it contained her childhood, those ineffable opening years of the beautiful, sad mystery of life; it contained, or was the framework of, her childish dreams. All children have wonderful dreams, but to Kezia grown up the dreams of little Kezia must have been everything.

A child she remained. Not only did she delve with affection into the child she had been; she continued to be child-like in her outlook. Hence, I think, her directness, and her unstudied lack of Euphuisms. It was not a realism that she had learned from the Russians. In New Zealand, as in other "new countries", people grew up so quickly that they forgot there ever were certain things. In Europe people grew up, and then, like the English, denied that these things existed; or, like the French, were nasty about them;

or, like the Germans, were coarse about them. But Katherine Mansfield never grew up. It was as natural for her to write *See-Saw* as it was to eat her dinner. If any one doubts this, or thinks it just an attempt to explain, let him read letter after letter, and Journal entry after entry, showing the girlish joy about the details of "setting up house"—a "tiny little" house, always with a certain kind of wall-paper, certain flowers on the table, and so on. For example: (From the south of France, December 29, 1915). "If you should come, I have found a tiny villa for us—which seems to me almost perfect. It stands alone in a small garden, with terraces. It faces the 'midi', and gets the sun all day long. It has a stone verandah, and a little round table, where we can sit and eat, or work. A charming tiny kitchen with pots and pans, and a big coffee pot, you know." She writes on and on in this happy strain, and when a letter arrives from her husband, sends him another long letter that night: "Is it true? Is this really coming true? I have to sign the agreement and pay a month in advance to-morrow. Then to order the coal and the wood, and see my *femme de menage*, who has already been found, 'pour trois heures le matin'. All the rest of the day—I do not know how I have spent it. Such a lovely wild day, brimming over with colour and light. I have found the shortest way to our home, by a road you do not know, through fields of jonquils, and past the olive trees that blow so silver and black to-day—Yes, I have found out a lovely way. And I have made out a list of our modest provisions that I shall buy on Friday. In fact, I have made out more than one list." Next day she writes twice again. The first letter begins: "Money doesn't frighten me a bit. We'll be two little silk-worms, and live on mulberry leaves. If you come here, we shall both write poetry—the little house is there waiting for us. Its eyes are shut till I open them. *Tout bas, tout bas mon coeur chante: Cinquante kilos de charbon de pierre; cinquante kilos de charbon de coke, et de bois pour allumer, pour cinq sous.*" Later, in her second letter she says: "I have been over the villa again. There is the loveliest green water-pot, like you admired. Then I went back to her house, and made out a lease, signed, paid, and put the key in my pocket.—We sat talking. They told me not to buy flowers for your arrival, they had enough in their garden—I *walked home with the key in my hand.*"¹ What an adorable little girl housewife! She makes a little poem out of the coal and wood. She mentally lists and re-lists the Friday provisions. "The loveliest green water pot"! And she walks home hugging the key!

1. Italics mine.

I have mentioned that her directness is the directness of a child. Once, in an absent-minded moment, I lent *In a German Pension* to an elderly spinster. A New-England spinster. A schoolmarm. A Prohibitionist. An anti-cigarette leaguer. Unfortunately she was also a "100 per center", and hated the Germans. Hence she read the first stories with gusto, and went right on, till she came to the story of the little girl who tended the restaurant. Then, waving the book in the air, she confronted me. "To think that there is a publisher, anywhere in the world, who is allowed to publish such stuff!" If it had happened in the spinster's own country, I might have been there still, in jail. I mention the story, and tell my story about it, because both illustrate one aspect of Katherine Mansfield. It is the child wondering about some of the mysteries of life; the child curious, disgusted and thrilled,—but not wicked or abnormal,—just a child, hurt at the wickedness and selfishness of this world, and deeply wounded by the cruelty of life. But elderly spinsters and schoolmarms often forget what a child is like.

The next best thing she does is the thing, whatever it may be, that she has seen. If she tries to invent a plot (even if she gives it a setting she knows well), it doesn't quite come off, as she realised herself about her story, *Je ne parle pas francais*. She really had not to invent plots. She was a young woman, but she had seen much. It was not for nothing that she was sent on a voyage over 11,000 miles at the age of 13. Has anyone, I wonder, described the sights and smells and passengers on an ocean liner as Katherine Mansfield has done,—down to the apron of the stewardess, the feeling of the rubber mats, the half-doubted warmth and comfort of deck chairs and rugs, the weed-covered piles of the wharves as the steamer leaves and approaches? At 18 she had "crossed the line" again, to the joy and excitement of home-coming, only to realise, with an ache, that she had been for ever unfitted for life at the outposts of civilisation. Was it the camping trip at this juncture that opened her eyes to the seamy side of bush-ranging and stock-farming (that we meet in *Millie*, *The Woman at the Store*, etc.)? Also she had seen, during five impressionable years, the externals of life in London, which is half the world. Back in London once more on a small allowance, she tried to earn a living by music and acting, and knew, at the age of twenty, all the misery of the competitive struggle for bread in a European capital. The story *Pictures*, as no reader of it needs to be told, is a slice of life. Katherine Mansfield knew this sort of thing quite as well as Gissing, and knew it from the woman's side. Natur-

ally sympathetic with suffering, she writes of it with complete knowledge. Dickens was one of her favourite authors, but she seems to me a little more honest than Dickens in writing about low types. Of course, in Dickens's time it was more of a novelty to write about low types as though you knew them except as *your* servants, and Dickens only occasionally allows himself to do it. But Katherine Mansfield *becomes* her character. She has left a whole gallery of pathetic types: Miss Brill; the school-mistress in *The Singing Lesson*; the owner of the Canary; *The Lady's Maid*, and many others.

The crowning example of the pathetic type, and here it is not a low type, is *The Daughters of the Late Colonel*, which won the enthusiastic praise of Hardy.

It shows the restraint of her art that she is so often content to let it go at pathos. She is too sane, too humourous, to think for long that most of life is tragedy. But she can do tragedy too: *The Life of Ma Parker* and *Bliss* testify to that.

It is strange that I have not mentioned her humour until now. It is as characteristic as anything about her. I have heard her compared to Chekhov, and indeed heard her accused of appropriating Chekhov and dressing him up; but these critics quite overlook her humour,—which is a wide miss. How much humour is there in Chekhov, save the humour of farce, such as we see in the story of the Eel-Pout? But Katherine Mansfield is all humour. Her first book, *In a German Pension*, shows that. It is not a good book, as she herself quickly realised. I think it offended her chiefly because of its lack of sympathy. It offends me most for its lack of art. I do not mean that it is untrue. It is extraordinarily true, as those who have lived in German pensions before the War will know. It is a real bit of life. But less characterization of these types would have done. It is inartistic because it is not selective, as all art must be. She puts in everything, and wastes enough amusing material for the making of a dozen books. But to come back to my point: it is selfishness and bad manners seen by a humourist. The power to observe unpleasant and hateful types was to flower later in *Two Tuppenny Ones, Please*; but the humour of the portrayal did not diminish, and the only later lapse from the artistic into *quelque chose de trop* is *Mariage à la Mode*. In fact, Katherine Mansfield hardly ever ceases to be a humourist, even in dealing with the unpleasant things, e. g., in *The Woman at the Store*; and in her most tragic stories—*Bliss*, for example, and *An Ideal Family*—humour is not far away.

It is her humour that saves her from sentiment. At one time and another there must have been 17,047 Canadian and American

authoresses who have written about children. And the trouble with them all, so far as I know them, is their sentimentalism. They are sticky with it. Katherine Mansfield has written more about children than about anything else, but I do not know of a single passage which is objectionably sentimental. She has written much about love, and one delightful idyll, *Something Childish but very Natural*. There is nothing cheap in it. At the same time she is not a humourist merely poking fun at this boy and girl of 18 and 16. Not in the least. Her sympathies are all with them both. But humour bubbles around and through everything.

For humour the Letters may be opened almost at random. Here is a letter to a friend who painted:

If this weather goes on, my girl, I'm afraid you'll have to make a canvas boat of your picture, and I will have to turn my writing table upside down, and float out of the window. But perhaps God in his goodness will allow us to bob near each other for a moment. I have been informed by my great-aunt Charlotte (of Bangalore, Worgle Avenue) that all those who are saved have expected a recurrence of the Flood ever since the Kaiser was recognised to be Anti-Christ. And are FULLY PREPARED FOR IT. Can't you see them done up in impervious cases, like preserved meats, like the Micawber family starting off for Australia?

I spent a mournful half morning yesterday being thumped and banged and held up the heels by my doctor, who gave me no comfort at all, but half-hinted in fact, that, given another hearty English winter or two, the chances were I'd bend and bow under my rheumatism until I became a permanent croquet hoop. . . .

So, if in a year or two (I don't think the rain will stop before then), you should come through my gate and find me in the garden as a sort of decorative arch, with a scarlet runner growing through me, you will know that the worst has happened.

Good-bye for now, mia bella. Salute my friends, frown on my enemies.

I shall conclude as I began, by calling attention once more to her art. I have said enough to indicate my opinion of its greatness, but I should like to add some very tentative words to hint at the distinction of its charm. I do so because I hear things said of it that seem to me to be egregiously false. I hear her called "one of the Realists", and "Russian". By "Realism" I am inclined to think these critics mean "vividness", which is something quite different. As to her being Russian, that is quite absurd. There is a tendency in the Russian writers, which only the greatest of them overcome, to sprawl. Katherine Mansfield should rather be called Greek. There is an almost startlingly Greek economy

about some of her things. I have called *Something Childish* an idyll, and I do not use that word loosely, as it is so often used. I mean the deft Theocritean "little picture" of life. *Two Tuppenny Ones, Please* (which, by the way, only a Ruth Draper could read or recite aloud) is as terse as the *Mimes* of Herondas, or the Letters of Alciphron. But these are generalities. What is peculiarly her own in Katherine Mansfield's writing? Her husband has written: "I can only say that her work seems to me to be of a finer and purer kind than that of her contemporaries. It is more spontaneous, more vivid, more delicate and more beautiful." It may seem presumption to add a word to this. I agree with the epithets he uses, and I think the vividness and the beauty of her work must strike all readers. But there is a completeness of art about her, which to me at least these words seem to miss; an objectivity, an abandonment to the "external world", a oneness with Nature, which some of the greatest poets have insisted on,—Goethe and Lucretius, for example. This shines supreme in her almost unique ability to throw herself into a mood. Consider, for example, *Carnation* and *The Wind Blows*. And then, "Die lebendige Natur" in the Introduction to *At the Bay*. There is something about this writing which makes me think of the haunting words of Keats:

Magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn.

I feel, too, that this element in her writing is intimately connected with her joy and delight in being quite alone. Most sociable and "conversable" of people, pining for good talk often, when living by herself in foreign countries, she cannot contain herself for pleasure, at other times, in utter solitude. She writes, very naively, in this strain sometimes, when she and her husband have just separated for a while. It was a consolation to her often in nights of illness. She writes to a friend (June 1919):

Oh these nights,—sitting up in bed, waiting for the black trees to turn into green trees. And yet when dawn comes, it is always so beautiful and terrible,—the coming of light is such a miracle—that it's almost worth waiting for. And then, as the hours strike through the night, I wander through cities—in fancy. Slip along unfamiliar streets invisible—or down on some quay-side I watch the boats putting out in the dark, and smell the night scent of the open sea, until lying awake becomes an ecstasy.

One's own life, one's own secret private life, what a queer positive thing it is! Nobody knows where you are—nobody has the remotest idea who you are even.

The Brontes—last night in bed I was reading Emily's poems.
There is one:

I know not how it falls on me,
This summer evening, hushed and lone,
Yet the faint wind comes soothingly,
With something of an olden tone.

Forgive me if I've shunned too long
Your gentle greeting, earth and air!
Yet sorrow withers e'en the strong,
And who can fight against despair?

(She continues) The first line, why is it so moving? 'I know not how it falls on me.' And then the exquisite simplicity of

Forgive me if I've shunned too long
Your gentle greeting, earth and air.

To this art, as she conceived it, there is a remarkable little dedication in the Journal, written two years before her death, but at a time when she does not know whether she will live "for months or for weeks". "Honesty is the only thing one seems to prize beyond life, love, death, everything. It alone remaineth. O you who come after me, will you believe it?—Truth is the only thing worth having; it's more thrilling than love, more joyful, more passionate. It simply cannot fail...I, at any rate, give the remainder of my life to it, and to it alone."