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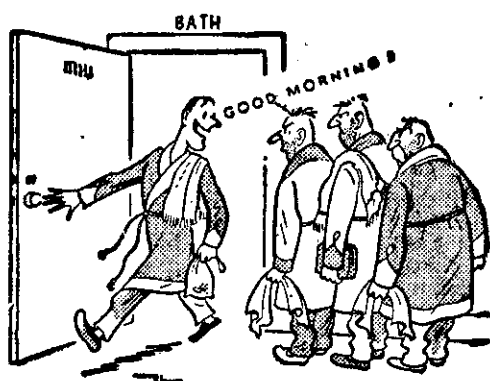
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BEAUTY OUT OF DESPAIR

Katherine Mansfield's Letters

From a talk by
J. MIDDLETON MURRY,
in the BBC's Overseas Service

"IT really is a heavenly gift to be able to put yourself, jasmine, summer grass, a kingfisher, a poet, a pony, an excursion, and a new sponge bag and bedroom slippers, all into an envelope. How does one return thanks for a piece of somebody's life? When I am depressed by the superiority of men, I comfort myself with the thought that they can't write letters like that." So Katherine Mansfield wrote to a friend. I think there is something in it. Of all the great men letter-writers I know, Keats came nearest to putting a piece of his life into them, but then he did it deliberately, in his letters to his brother and sister-in-law, who were on the other side of the Atlantic. But Katherine Mansfield did it because she couldn't help it. First, then, here are the letters of a woman. Second, of a woman in love. And third, of a woman in love not with her husband only, but with everything. Not with everything always—her letters are continually passing from gaiety to despair and despair to gaiety, but she never gives rein to her despair for long, and she didn't believe that it was possible to express her despair directly. "I simply go dark," she says. "It is terrible, terrible. How terrible I could only put into writing, and never say in a letter." Partly, no doubt, this was sheer fastidiousness. She had a horror of what she called confession. But much more deeply it was a profound aesthetic conviction that despair could not be expressed directly. The same conviction that inspired Keats' *Ode on Melancholy*: "No, no, go not to Lethe . . ." to find the Goddess of Despair—

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;

*And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips,
Bidding adieu.*

I think this doctrine that despair should be and can only be expressed by beauty is extraordinarily profound. Katherine Mansfield hints at it continually in her letters, and applies it instinctively in her stories. In one letter she wrote, "We see death in life as we see death in a flower that is fresh unfolded. Our hymn is to the flower's beauty. We would make that beauty immortal, because we know. I mean, by this knowledge, deserts of vast eternity. But the difference is, I couldn't tell anybody bang out about those deserts, they are my secret. I might write about a boy eating strawberries, or a woman combing her hair on a windy morning, and that's the only way I can ever mention them, but they must be there."

I suppose it's no accident that Keats and Katherine Mansfield both died early

of tuberculosis, whose toxic fevers seem immensely to heighten the beauty of the created world and give it an almost intolerable definition—at the same time as they sound an inward warning of the precariousness of one's hold of life. But the effects are dazzlingly rich. They give one a sense of the triumph of beauty. Let Katherine Mansfield herself explain the meaning of her phrase. "Do you really feel that all beauty is marred by ugliness, and the lovely woman has bad teeth? I don't feel quite that. For it seems to me that if beauty were absolute it would no longer be the kind of beauty it is. Beauty triumphs over ugliness in life, that's what I feel. And that marvellous triumph is what I long to express. The poor man lives, and tears glitter in his beard. And that is so beautiful I could bow down. Why? Nobody can say. I sit in a waiting room where all is ugly, where it's dirty, dull, dreadful, where the sick people waiting with me to see the doctor are all marked by suffering and sorrow, and a very poor workman comes in, takes off his cap, humbly, beautifully, walks on tiptoe, has a look as though he were in church, has a look as though he believed that behind that doctor's door there shone the miracle of healing, and all is changed, all is marvellous, life is all at one and the same time far more mysterious and far simpler than we know."

"In Love With Everything"

Now I've let Katherine Mansfield herself explain, far better than I could, why she can be truly described as a woman in love with everything. The constant alternations of joy and despair in her letters, in themselves so painful, are expressed in terms of beauty. In that language she contrives, by her own natural magic, to convey the subtlest modulations of personal feeling. You need to read the letters over and over again to understand all that is contained in some of her pellucid unpremeditated phrases.

(continued on next page)

Wild Flowers of Speech (2)

"His Whereabouts Are Unknown"

*I'VE looked within, I've looked without,
I CANNOT find my whereabouts,
Of these I always keep a pair,
One in use and one as spare,
O hear my moan, O hear my shout,
Where DID I leave my whereabouts?
O hear my shout, O hear my moan,
My whereabouts is still unknown.
And what am I indeed without
My precious little whereabouts?
A wraith, a shade, a husk, a shell;
So let the crier grab his bell
And through the wondering city tell
How liberally I will pay
Any person who can say
Whereabouts and whereaway
My whereabouts has gone astray.*

—ARNOLD WALL.