



KATHERINE MANSFIELD
Style is the woman herself

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It is a kind of chamber music, exquisitely controlled, in which vast depths of feeling are half hidden in a slight change of tone. She writes to a friend, "Was there really a new baby in your letter? Oh dear, some people have all the babies in this world. And as sometimes happens to us women, just before your letter came, I found myself tossing a little creature into the air, and saying, 'Whose boy are you?' But he was far too shadowy, too far away, to reply." There's a personal tragedy uttered there.

A Little Black Spot

Or again, when she writes in a mood of despair from her isolation in Italy, after being cheated by a gardener: "Oh, why are people swindlers? My heart bleeds when they swindle me, doesn't yours? Why am I not a calm, indifferent, grown-up woman? And this great, cold, indifferent world, like a silent, malignant river, and these creatures rolling over on like great logs—crashing into one. I can try to keep to one side, slip down unnoticed among the trembling rainbow-coloured bubbles of foam and the faint reeds, I try to turn and turn in a tiny quiet pool. But it's no good. Sooner or later one is pushed out into the middle of it all. Oh, I'm really sadder than you, I believe. Shall I send this letter or write another one—a gay one? No, he'll understand. There is a little boat far out, moving along, inevitable it looks, and dead silent. A little black spot, like the spot on a lung."

The power of that final phrase is terrifying. One understood, only too well. Or again, during one of the times when the high fever was upon her. "L.M. has broken my thermometer. Good! I got another for 12 francs. It seems to play the same tune, though the notes are not so plain." The same tune. It would be hard to pack more pain into a smiling phrase.

The Style was the Woman

But the gaiety of her letters is never forced. Her natural mode of speech was gay, and her letters are full of jokes. Rather rueful jokes, many of them, but quite irrepressible, and all with an inimitable quality of their own. One might call it a blend of wit and humour. What

is more peculiar is that they are illuminating. They flash a quick, glancing light on a person or a situation, so that they seem to be an inherent part of her magic of style. Of her, Buffon's famous maxim concerning style is the obvious and literal truth. Style is the woman herself. So for that matter is Flaubert's "Style is a way of seeing." And Katherine Mansfield's way of seeing was a smiling way.

Because of her six years' wandering as an invalid, whole periods of her life are chronicled day by day in her letters. They become in one sense an intimate autobiography, but it is curiously and delightfully objective. Not so much that she saw herself objectively (though she did), as that she is not directly concerned with herself at all. She is forever describing the life about her—the things she sees from her windows, the maids who look after her in the hotels, her doll, her cats. The doll and the cats she endowed with a language and a character of their own. They speak their own minute and enchanting commentary on the things that happened. And the women who wait upon her, what personalities they are. Juliette and Marie in the south of France, Mrs. Honey in Cornwall. Under Katherine Mansfield's touch they reveal the genius of the race. Marie and Mrs. Honey—are they not the exquisite and simple flowering of a whole civilisation? And so it is that Katherine Mansfield's letters are like a long and lovely story in which joy and pain are inexplicably intertwined. They are life—but life revealed by the vision of one who, knowing that she hadn't very long to look at the pattern, turned all the energies of her eager soul into examining and marvelling at it. Setting down its beauties with the tender fidelity of love, a love that laughed, yet with tears in its eyes.

And behind all this is the story of a struggle to live. Faith to live in order to be able to receive the wonder of life into her soul and to express it. And then, as the brief years draw to an end, the struggle to live in a different sense, to achieve an entire simplicity of soul, a central and crystal clarity which should not change, to which joy and sadness should be as one.

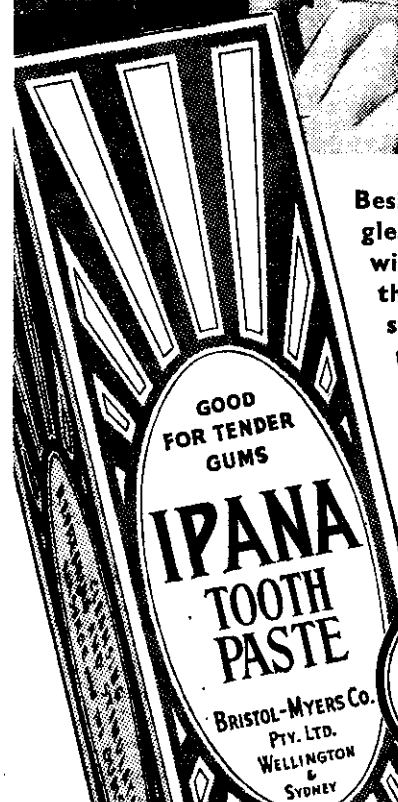
So it is that since her letters were first published in 1929 they have made the conquest of the world. They have, I think, been translated into every European language and though, when I first made up my mind to publish them, I hardly expected this to happen, it seems to me natural enough to-day. In one letter she speaks of the only treasure, the only heirloom we have to leave, our "little grain of truth"—the truth that can be discovered only by love. Her grain of truth—she would never have claimed that it was larger—is of such quality that it is self-evidently universal.

Negro Conductor

AT a recent concert in Berlin, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra was led by a United States war correspondent in battledress, Rudolph Dunbar, a Negro. The 2000 Berliners and the 500 Allied soldiers in the audience applauded warmly when the conductor led the orchestra through Weber's *Oberon* and Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*. They broke into cheers, calling him back five times. Then he gave them Berlin's first hearing of William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony*.

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