

# KATHERINE MANSFIELD IN MENTON

A NOTE on the Katherine Mansfield Memorial recently created at Menton (Alpes Maritimes) South of France

by

O. E. MIDDLETON

THE following news item appeared recently in newspapers in this country:

"In brilliant sunshine a crowd stood outside the little Villa Isola Bella at Menton in the South of France to take part in a ceremony of significance to New Zealanders and world-wide admirers of Katherine Mansfield. The ceremony was the inauguration of the villa as a memorial to the writer on her birthday, October 14th. The New Zealand Minister to France, Mr. J. Wilson, travelled from Paris to represent his government and to address the gathering . . ."

Behind this small notice is a story too long to be told in detail here, but which largely concerns the publisher and man of letters Monsieur J. L. Francois-Primo of Monaco.

Katherine Mansfield first came to Menton in February, 1920, when she stayed at the Villa Flora, a pension on the outskirts of the town and within a few hundred yards of the Italian border. She appears to have liked the place and after a short visit to Hampstead in England, returned to the town with her devoted friend and companion L.M.

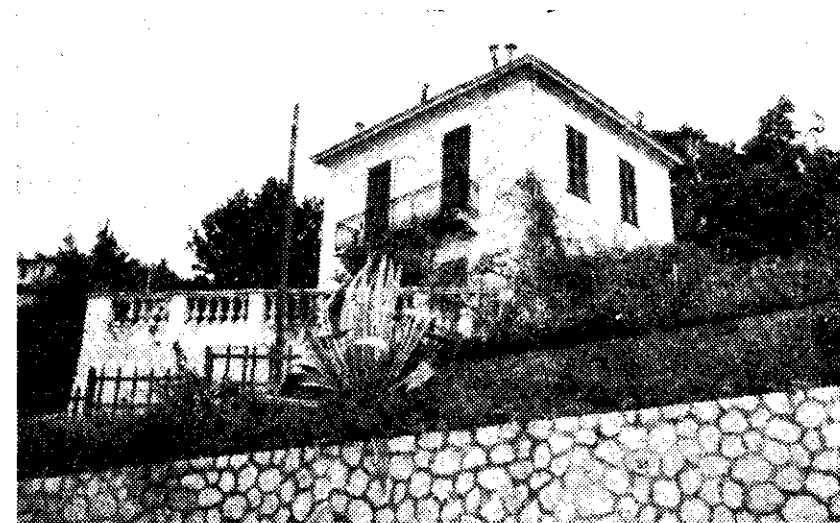
This time she was able to rent a small villa on a slope near the railway line and not far from the little Garavan station. She was delighted at her good fortune and speaks enthusiastically of the Villa Isola Bella in her letters of the time.

In his fine biography, Antony Alpers tells us that Katherine was living in the Villa when *Bliss* was published in England and it was here too that she eagerly awaited and read the reviews of the book which appeared in the English papers. The whole place seems to have suited

her very well—and at this period of her illness she was not an easy person to suit—and while she was at Menton she wrote the stories "Miss Brill," "The Lady's Maid," "The Young Girl," "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (a story well-known to radio listeners since its production by the BBC), "The Stranger," "The Life of Ma Parker" and others.

The town and its environs occupy a peculiarly favoured position even for a region like the Medi-

terranean and it is claimed that temperatures at Menton are always a degree or so warmer than anywhere else along the coast. Behind rises the sheltering mass of the Alpes Maritimes whose foothills descend on either side to the sea's edge, and in front there is only the mild Mediterranean. Cactus, mimosa, citrus and olive trees thrive, and during the occasional picnics she went on



The Villa Isola Bella as it appeared when Katherine Mansfield stayed there

with friends into the surrounding hills Katherine must have admired the groves of cypress, eucalypt and the gnarled but beautiful Mediterranean pines whose sugared seeds are a choice confection. On rare walks she may have picked bunches of the aromatic wild rosemary or watched the local fishermen catching Poulpes and Calamares beside the rocks near the frontier.

She stayed in the villa at Menton until May, 1921, when she left to try another "cure" in Switzerland. Two years later she was dead.

Francois-Primo did not come to live in Menton until a year or two later, and he first heard of Katherine Mansfield from her old landlady Mrs. Honey. He began to read her stories and was soon a keen admirer of her work. He collected all her published work and any other material he could find which described her. The idea of creating some kind of a concrete memorial to the writer grew gradually out of his admiration for her and his conviction of her outstanding worth. It was not until after the Second World War, however, that a definite move was made to establish the memorial.

A committee was formed under the distinguished patronage of Prince Rainier III of Monaco and presided over by the prefect of the Alpes Maritimes which included among its members the High Commissioner for New Zealand, the noted writers Andre Maurois, Francis Carco and Daniel Rops and numerous others of Katherine Mansfield's admirers and well-wishers.

During the recent war, the town of Menton—which was until quite recent times the Italian town of Mentone—was occupied and pillaged by Mussolini's troops (the Italian writer Italo Calvino gives an interesting account of a visit there with a Young Fascist

contingent during the war), and in addition many of its buildings were damaged by shell-fire from Italian warships. One of the buildings so damaged was the Villa Isola Bella.

Although it was originally hoped to buy the whole of the building, lack of financial support from New Zealand as well as the extra cost of repairing war damage forced the committee to compromise. The original living quarters of the villa were bought from Mrs. Honey by a private person who nevertheless undertook to respect the South-East wall of the building and the commemorative plaque put there by the committee. The committee retained a small single-roomed masonry building about 17 feet square (the former kitchen) and a small area of ground approximately 25 feet wide on the road frontage and 40 feet deep.

The building was repaired and renovated and flagstones laid and access steps made in the garden with money from the Memorial Fund. New Zealand hybrid trees and shrubs were specially imported from Kew Gardens in England by the New Zealand Government and planted with great care under Monsieur Francois-Primo's supervision, and when I called on him at his home in Monaco in March, 1956, he was able to tell me that the inauguration ceremony would soon take place.

The single room of the small Museum was to hold photographs of Wellington, details of the stories she had written while at Menton and some treasured articles of furniture which she had used during her stay. Some books of her work were also to be included, but the main bulk of these are to be presented to the Menton Library, where it is felt they would be better housed and more easily accessible.

In addition, a bronze medallion some 15 inches by 18 inches, showing the writer's left profile will hang on an inside wall. This last was cast from a marble sculpture made by a local artist called Bernard from an old photograph held by Francois-Primo.

On either side of the solid timber door outside is a bronze plaque bearing a simple fern leaf.

In the small flagstoned Memorial Garden which encloses two sides of the Museum grow New Zealand hybrid myrtles, pittosporums, leptospermums, (continued on next page)



Katherine Mansfield



Part of the old and new town of Menton, looking along the coast. The Villa Isola Bella is in the middle distance at left. Some of the hills in the middle distance and all those in the background are in Italian territory