

Katherine Mansfield at the Prieuré

excerpts from the

Journal of Katherine Mansfield

Edited by John Middleton Murry

KM left Paris for Switzerland in May 1922 and returned from there to London late in August.

My first conversation with O[uspensky] took place on August 30, 1922.

On that occasion I began by telling him how dissatisfied I was with the idea that Life must be a lesser thing than we were capable of imagining it to be. I had the feeling that the same thing happened to nearly everybody whom I knew and whom I did not know. No sooner was their youth, with the little force and impetus characteristic of youth, done, then they stopped growing. At the very moment that one felt that now was the time to gather oneself together, to use one's whole strength, to take control, to be an adult, in fact, they seemed content to swap the darling wish of their hearts for innumerable little wishes. Or the image that suggested itself to me was that of a river flowing away in countless little trickles over a dark swamp.

They deceived themselves, of course. They called this trickling away—greater tolerance—wider interests—a sense of proportion—so that work did not rule out the possibility of 'life.' Or they called it an escape from all this mind-probing and self-consciousness—a simpler and therefore a better way of life. But sooner or later, in literature at any rate, there sounded an undertone of deep regret. There was an uneasiness, a sense of frustration. One heard, one thought one heard, the cry that began to echo in one's own being: "I have missed it. I have given up. This is not what I want. If this is all, then Life is not worth living."

But I *know* it is not all. How does one know that? Let me take the case of K. M. She has led, ever since she can remember, a very typically false life. Yet, through it all, there have been moments, instants, gleams, when she has felt the possibility of something quite other.

September 30

"Do you know what individuality is?"

"No."

"Consciousness of will. To be conscious that you have a will and can act."

Yes, it is. It's a glorious saying.

October 3

Arrived Paris. Took rooms in Select Hotel, Place de la Sorbonne, for ten francs a day per person. What feeling? Very little. The room is like the room where one could work—or so it feels. I have been a perfect torment to L. M. who is pale with dark eyes. I suspect my reactions so much that I hardly dare say what I think of the room and so on. Do I know? Not really. Not more than she.

I have thought of J. to-day. We are no longer together. Am I in the right way, though? No, not yet. Only looking on—telling others. I am not in body and soul. I feel a bit of a sham . . . And so I am. One of the K. M.'s is so sorry. But of course she is. She has to die. *Don't feed her.*

October. Important.

When we can begin to take our failures non-seriously, it means we are ceasing to be afraid of them. It is of immense importance to learn to *laugh at ourselves*. What Shestov calls 'a touch of easy familiarity and derision' has its value.

What will happen to Anatole France and his charming smile? Doesn't it disguise a lack of feeling, like M.'s weariness?

Life should be like a steady, visible light.

What remains of all those years together? It is difficult to say. If they were so important, how could they have come to nothing. Who *gave up* and *why*?

Haven't I been saying, all along, that the fault lies in trying to cure the body and paying no heed whatever to the sick psyche? Gurdjieff claims to do just what I have always dreamed might be done.

The sound of a street pipe, hundreds and hundreds of years old.

October 17

Fire is sunlight and returns to the sun again in an unending cycle. . . . G[urdjieff] looks exactly like a desert chief. I kept thinking of Doughty's "Arabia" . . .

To be wildly enthusiastic, or deadly serious—both are wrong. Both pass. One must keep ever present a sense of humour. It depends entirely on yourself how much you see or hear or understand. But the sense of humour I have found of use in every single occasion of my life. Now perhaps you understand what the word 'indifferent' means. It is to learn not to mind, and not to show your mind.

October 10

[The following entry was torn out of her journal to be sent to me. But K. M. changed her mind. I found it among her papers with this superscription, "These pages from my journal. Don't let them distress you. The story *has* a happy ending, really and truly."]

I have been thinking this morning until it seems I may get things straightened out if I try to write . . . where I am.

Ever since I came to Paris I have been as ill as ever. In fact, yesterday I thought I was dying. It is not imagination. My heart is so exhausted and so tied up that I can only walk to the taxi and back. I get up at midi and go to bed at 5.30. I try to 'work' by fits and starts, but the time has gone by. I cannot work. Ever since April I have done practically nothing. But why? Because, although M.'s treatment improved my blood and made me look well and did have a good effect on my lungs, it made my heart not a snap better, and I only won that improvement by living the life of a corpse in the Victoria Palace Hotel.

My spirit is nearly dead. My spring of life is so starved that it's just not dry. Nearly all my improved health is pretence—acting. What does it amount to? Can I walk? Only creep. Can I do anything with my hands or body? Nothing at all. I am an absolutely helpless invalid. What is my life? It is the existence of a parasite. And five years have passed now, and I am in straighter bonds than ever.

Ah, I feel a little calmer already to be writing. Thank God for writing! I am so terrified of what I am going to do. All the voices out of the 'Past' say "Don't do it." J. says "M. is a scientist. He does his part. It's up to you to do yours." But that is no good at all. I can no more cure my psyche than my body. Less it seems to me. Isn't J. himself, perfectly fresh and well, utterly depressed by boils on his neck? Think of five

years' imprisonment. Someone has got to help me to get out. If that is a confession of weakness—it is. But it's only lack of imagination that calls it so. And who is going to help me? Remember Switzerland: "I am helpless." Of course, he is. One prisoner cannot help another. Do I believe in medicine alone? No, never. In science alone? No, never. It seems to me childish and ridiculous to suppose one can be cured like a cow *if one is not a cow*. And here, all these years, I have been looking for someone who agreed with me. I have heard of G[urdjieff]. who seems not only to agree but to know infinitely more about it. Why hesitate?

Fear. Fear of what? Doesn't it come down to fear of losing J.? I believe it does. But, good Heavens! Face things. What have you of him now? What is your relationship? He talks to you—sometimes—and then goes off. He thinks of you tenderly. He dreams of a life with you *some day* when the miracle has happened. You are important to him as a dream. Not as a living reality. For you are not one. What do you share? Almost nothing. Yet there is a deep, sweet, tender flooding of feeling in my heart which is love for him and longing for him. But what is the good of it as things stand? Life together, with me ill, is simply torture with happy moments. But it's not life You do know that J. and you are only a kind of dream of what might be. And that might-be never, never can be true unless you are well. And you don't get well by 'imagining' or 'waiting' or trying to bring off that miracle yourself.

Therefore if the Grand Lama of Thibet promised to help you—how can you hesitate? Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others, for those voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the truth.

True, Tchekov didn't. Yes, but Tchekov died. And let us be honest. How much do we know of Tchekov from his letters? Was that all? Of course not. Don't you suppose he had a whole longing life of which there is hardly a word? Then read the final letters. He has given up hope. If you de-sentimentalise those final letters they are terrible. There is no more Tchekov. Illness has swallowed him.

But perhaps to people who are not ill, all this is nonsense. They have never travelled this road. How can they see where I am? All the more reason to go boldly forward alone. Life is not simple. In spite of all we say about the mystery of life, when we get down to it we want to treat it as though it were a child's tale

Now, Katherine, what do you mean by health? And what do you want it for?

Answer: By health I mean the power to live a full, adult, living, breathing life in close contact with what I love—the earth and the wonders thereof—the sea—the sun. All that we mean when we speak of the external world. A want to enter into it, to be part of it, to live in it, to learn from it, to lose all that is superficial and acquired in me and to become a conscious direct human being. I want, by understanding myself, to

understand others. I want to be all that I am capable of becoming so that I may be (and here I have stopped and waited and waited and it's no good—there's only one phrase that will do) *a child of the sun*. About helping others, about carrying a light and so on, it seems false to say a single word. Let it be at that. *A child of the sun*.

Then I want to *work*. At what? I want so to live that I work with my hands and my feeling and my brain. I want a garden, a small house, grass, animals, books, pictures, music. And out of this, the expression of this. I want to be writing. (Though I may write about cabmen. That's no matter.)

But warm, eager, living life—to be rooted in life—to learn, to desire to know, to feel, to think, to act. That is what I want. And nothing less. That is what I must try for.

I wrote this for myself. I shall now risk sending it to J. He may do with it what he likes. He must see how much I love him.

And when I say 'I fear'—don't let it disturb you, dearest heart. We all fear when we are in waiting rooms. Yet we must pass beyond them, and if the other can keep calm, it is all the help we can give each other

And this all sounds very strenuous and serious. But now that I have wrestled with it, it's no longer so. I feel happy—deep down. *All is well*.

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[Note—by John Middleton Murry:]

With those words Katherine Mansfield's Journal comes to a fitting close. Thenceforward the conviction that "All was well" never left her. She entered a kind of spiritual brotherhood at Fontainebleau. The object of this brotherhood, at least as she understood it, was to help its members to achieve a spiritual regeneration.

After some three months, at the beginning of 1923, she invited me to stay with her for a week. I arrived early in the afternoon of January 9. I have never seen, nor shall I ever see, any one so beautiful as she was on that day; it was as though the exquisite perfection which was always hers had taken possession of her completely. To use her own words, the last grain of 'sediment,' the last 'traces of earthly degradation,' were departed for ever. But she had lost her life to save it.

As she came up the stairs to her room at 10 p. m. she was seized by a fit of coughing which culminated in a violent haemorrhage. At 10.30 she was dead.