

*Looking Back to the Last Days
of
Katherine Mansfield*

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Translated from the Russian by R. Bernstein

Articles on Katherine Mansfield which appeared in French newspapers showed me that very few people know how she spent the last part of her life at Fontainebleau-Avon, at the Prieuré.

Fate allowed me to be with her at that time.

Although not a woman of letters, I have been haunted by the idea that it is the duty of everyone who has been brought, if only accidentally, into close contact with great people who have gone from us forever, to relate all that they know to those who love them and are interested in them.

I lived at the Prieuré amongst that group of people, sometimes considered 'absurd and ridiculous' ('un groupe de théosophes absurdes et agitées', as it was described in one of the articles), who did not, however, spare their strength in sincere search of the truth, unsatisfied and aspiring ... some, perhaps, to the understanding of the objective ideal—God; others striving to rid themselves of their faults; and yet others to achieve harmony in their moral and physical development. There were also those who simply lived without troubling themselves about complex ideologies. To the Prieuré went those who did not find satisfaction in the old ways and means of achievement then current in Europe. The ordinary human mind demands classification, a label—people do not like unnamed things; that is why the group was stamped with the name 'theosophists'. I do not know if such were there, for the leader did not consider himself one, and was even angry at hearing the name. Personally I was a Catholic and have remained one, but am endeavouring to be a Christian not only in name.

With Katherine Mansfield I could not converse on high topics—I did not then know English at all, and in French we used only very simple language. What she sought at the Prieuré I do not know, possibly everything. She once said to me: 'I like to see how much all the people here work and do what they have never done in their lives before, and do it quite well. When I get better, I shall also work, and shall write a lot, and I know already what I shall write'.

I had to make a great effort to join the group at the Prieuré; I came from Lithuania as a girl who had just started life, full of faith in the great possibilities of human achievement. My special gifts include drawing, music, singing, but most important of all I had an abundance of untried strength. An endless file of people from all parts of the world, interested in the work done here, went by; a sick English woman—an authoress—also arrived. When I first looked into her large intelligent eyes, I was inwardly drawn to her. Maids were not allowed in this strange house—everything had to be done by the inmates themselves, and I was detailed to help the sick woman. I gladly took care of her, and tried to anticipate what might give pleasure to this Englishwoman who was so modest in her requirements. After a short stay she went away; she was so ill that we did not think she would come back to the place. However, she did return, seemingly to stay. On the leader's instructions, a special balcony was constructed for her in the cowshed, for rest, or, perhaps, to renew her strength through the radiation of animal magnetism, or perhaps simply for the healthy smell of fresh manure.

It was a tiny wooden balcony, artistically designed, with a small staircase of five or six steps, surrounded by a balustrade gilded in Eastern style. The floor was covered with mattresses and real Eastern rugs. Cushions and round pouffes, covered with coloured tapestry, invited one to rest and gaze at the ceiling, cleverly painted by our talented artist with all kinds of birds, insects and little animals hiding among fanciful branches. Among them one could detect caricatures of all the inmates of the house. Under the balcony stood our three cows and the mule, Drafit.

When my turn came to work for a week in the cowshed, I gave special care to the little balcony; I decorated the staircase with leaves and branches, and used to sit and wait for Mrs. Murry (we used to call Katherine Mansfield by her married name). Looking very serious, she would walk up the stairs slowly, carrying a notebook. I began milking the cow and, as ordered, used to take her a glass of fresh milk. I do not know whether she liked fresh milk, or whether it was repulsive to her, but she drank it, saying how amusing it was to listen to the sound of the flowing milk, and that she could judge by the sound whether I was tired, or in what mood I was; she realised that though I was not accustomed to manual labour no easy tasks were given to me.

Thus a certain warmth in our relationship opened up; it meant a great deal to me as I was away from home for the first time.

Then came Christmas. We all gathered around a huge illuminated Christmas-tree. there were many children in the house as some of the inmates had families. Mrs. Murry came down into the drawing rooms, looking very attractive in a dark purple taffeta dress, embroidered with tiny flowers; the dress was simply cut with shoulder straps as young girls wear. Her short hair was smoothly combed over her high forehead. With great interest she watched the children receiving presents, and afterwards recited some character-scenes in an English dialect. I did not understand the words, but it was interesting to hear the sharp changes in her voice, suggesting peasants quarrelling among themselves. The whole company surrounded her; the children without understanding the words, smiled at the expressions of her face, and the changes in her voice.

Seeing the author starting to take leave, I quickly went into her room, put some logs on the fire that I had started earlier, and lit the candles on a small bushy Christmas-tree which I had dug up in our wood and set before the fire while all the others were in the drawing room.

This is our little tree, just for the two of us, I thought, and nobody shall know about it; without any decorations, just candles ... but how many? One for Mrs. Murry, another for myself, and there must be a third for the one of whom, I feel, she awaits with so much excitement. Hearing her footsteps, I stood aside. She opened the door and cried out in surprise, On seeing me she said: 'Adele, why three?' I told her my thoughts, she smiled sadly and sank into the armchair. I covered her shoulders with a fluffy long scarf in wide blue and white stripes. (This scarf afterwards warmed me too) I moved up a footstool, and placing myself near her on the floor, embraced her slim knees. So we both sat in silence looking at our Christmas-tree. One candle burnt badly, it flickered and began to go out—'That's me', she whispered. No, no! I jumped up and put the others out first. This was her last Christmas-tree.

I did not know then the superstition about the three candles.

I opened her bed, placed a hot water bottle in it, and bade her good-night. She did not like being helped to undress.

Shortly after Christmas Mrs Murry had news of her husband, he was coming to see her. She became gayer, and it seemed as if she was feeling better. She wrote some notes and letters and waited, impatiently and with excitement, for the day arranged.

I was so glad for her, hoping for a miracle of recovery, for I knew that she was suffering from advanced tuberculosis.

I did not witness her meeting with he husband. I was then very busy in the kitchen with some urgent work and could only from time to time run into Mrs.

Murry's room to tidy up, to bring water and get a glimpse, if only from afar, of her silhouette with the thin raised shoulders and dark head.

She wished her husband to see all the peculiarities of our house, the theatre, the study-house, built and decorated by ourselves, the vapour-bath excavated in the slope, the vegetable gardens, the flowerbeds. there were many things of interest with which she wanted to acquaint her husband, and which aimed at harmonious development. Rhythmic exercises were practised, based on the regular movements of Eastern religious dances. They were performed to the accompaniment of low sounds of music, improvised in our presence. We were advised to do exercises for the development of criticism, concentration, discernment, and memory whilst engaged on hard manual work every day. Our watchful author had become interested in everything, and she wanted to share it with her husband, but it was too late. . . .

In the evening after dinner, Katherine Mansfield and husband listened to some music in the drawing-room, and afterwards, going up stairs to her room, she forgot every caution, and ran up quickly as any healthy person might do without touching the banister. He followed her, and she had hardly entered her room when blood spurted from her mouth. Her husband ran for the doctor who lived in the house, and met me in the corridor as I was taking hot water to them. On entering the room I saw the patient sitting on the edge of her bed, covering her mouth with her hands, blood was oozing through her fingers, I ran to her with a towel. Gasping for breath she called for her husband, and stared at the door with her eyes wide with terror. I ran out and met him in the corridor hastening along with the doctor. I did not return to her room, but threw myself on my bed and wept.

For the first time I saw death, it took away from me the Human form of the wonderful Mrs. Murry, who had brought beauty into and made easier the hard life of trials which I had chosen for myself.

Mr. Murry came to me after the funeral, and told me very kindly that his wife had written him about me, that he knew how attached I was to her, and asked me to accept and wear her clothes; there was also her beautiful Christmas gown.

I did not refuse this kindness. As I was carrying her clothes to the wardrobe along the top red corridor, from which once led monks' cells (the house was converted from an old monastery), a little red breasted bird flew in through the window, circled over me and fluttered out again. I remembered my grandmother's tales that the souls of those passed on visit their near ones in the shape of birds, and I started to pray for the peace of her soul.

Before leaving, Mr. Murry came to say good-bye; opening a small box he brought out a ring with a cluster of rubies; he said it was Mrs. Murry's most cherished and favorite ring; she received it from him on their betrothal. He asked and insisted that I should take it, as he thought his wife would have liked it. However, I felt that I had

no right to accept this precious thing, and suggested that I take it temporarily until he himself decided who should wear it by right. I wore this ring on special occasions; to me it was a symbol of her death—a dark-red garland.

But she scattered all over the world a garland of bright, beautiful stories. Her love knew no bounds; she grieved for every lost soul. She could not and did not want to measure, or to calculate. She did not fade away slowly, but her life burned out in a quick bright flame.

The modest gravestone bears no cross, but her whole being was filled with love, and, carried away by her example, I learned to love mankind.

On the anniversary of her death, Mr. Murry came from England, and we went together to the grave, to pay her homage. Then I handed over her favourite ring.