PAGE DR BLUM!

BLISS. *By Katherine Mansfield. 12mo. 280 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. $2.50.*

BLISS is one of those books which it is very hard to forget. Yet Bliss is not at all a likable book; Katherine Mansfield is impressed too much by people she dislikes and is more apt to write about them than about people she finds agreeable to her. Such at least is the evidence of these stories. In them the disagreeable people far outnumber the sympathetic; her likable characters, indeed, are usually introduced as a foil. Most of them are men and only two or three of them receive full-length portraits. Those figures which she draws in most carefully are women; they are selfish, weak, cultured, irritable, and conceited. Bliss in one sense is a book of neurotics; a literary corridor of the psychopathic ward.

But with what a vigour does she depict these neurotics. Typical of them is Monica Tyrrell, who suffered from nerves every morning from eight o'clock till about half-past eleven, "suffered so terribly that these hours were—agonizing, simply." There is Monica's male counterpart, Mr Reginald Peacock; fourteen pages are devoted to venomously meticulous account of a day from his life. There are Linda Burnell and her sister Beryl from the first story. Most horrible of all is the woman in The Escape, with her refrain of:

"Oh, why am I made to bear these things? . . . Oh, to care as I care—to feel as I feel, and never to be saved anything—never to know for one moment what it was to . . . to . . ."

From this treatment of Katherine Mansfield one might think that she was no more than a literary specialist in nervous disorders. The idea is mistaken; only about a third of the stories in her volume deal specifically with neurotics. It is simply that her handling of them is so vivid that they overshadow most of the other characters.

Yet these other characters are by no means lifeless. Her ob-

servation of people is extensive and accurate, and wherever her sympathy does not lead her to understanding, her hate does. Her style fits accurately to her matter. She has borrowed just enough from the new experiments in prose without trying to swallow them whole. In her punctuation she shows a positive genius. The result of all this is that her best descriptions are final and perfect; one must fight back the temptation to quote whole pages of them.

The form of her stories shows usually a certain amount of experiment; this carries her, in most of her work, to about the same stage as Chekhov. I do not mean to make any comparison of excellence with Chekhov; I mean simply that, like him, she has come to a point where she writes most of her stories around a situation instead of around a plot. Sometimes she goes farther. She has written one story around two themes instead of around a situation; she approaches here to the construction of music.

If you analyze Je Ne Parle Pas Français conventionally for its plot, you will find very little. It is the story of how an Englishman ran off to Paris with a girl and left her there alone on account of his greater love for his mother. Implication of Freud. It covers some forty-four pages but the plot as stated is disposed of in less than twenty; the rest of the space is taken up with the divagations of Raoul Duquette, the narrator. According to the standards of the Committee of Award of the O. Henry Memorial Prize Stories, it is badly and extravagantly constructed.

But abandoning all idea of plot, let us analyse the story for its themes. The little English girl, Mouse, is one of them, with her helpless refrain of *Je ne parle pas français.* Dick, the big Englishman, is the second theme. "He gets drunk slowly," says the narrator, "and at a certain moment begins to sing very low, very low, about a man who walks up and down trying to find a place where he can get some dinner. . . . How extraordinarily English that is . . . I remember that it ended where he did at last 'find a place' and ordered a little cake of fish, but when he asked for bread, the waiter cried contemptuously in a loud voice: 'We don't serve bread with one fish ball.' " That ridiculous song is repeated almost every time Dick enters the story; it serves as his motif.

With these two themes in mind, the construction of the story becomes clearer. The first theme is introduced; that takes eight pages, and not a word is wasted. Then an interlude on Raoul

Duquette. Second theme: Dick. *Waiter, a whiskey . . . We don't serve bread*, et cetera. Re-entry of first theme in counterpoint with the second: twenty pages. And in these pages only is there any suggestion of a plot. Finally, the Coda, in which the Mouse theme is universalized:

". . . Evenings when I sit in some gloomy café and an automatic piano starts playing a "Mouse" tune (there are dozens of tunes that evoke just her) I begin to dream things like . . .

"A little house on the edge of the sea, somewhere far, far away. A girl outside in a frock rather like Red Indian women wear, hailing a light, barefoot boy who runs up from the beach.

". . . The same girl, the same boy, different costumes—sitting at an open window, eating fruit and leaning out and laughing.

"All the wild strawberries are for you, Mouse. I won't touch one.

". . . A wet night. They are going home together under an umbrella. They stop at the door to press their wet cheeks together.

"And so on and so on . . ."

Analysed in this fashion, the story appears as handled with a sense of form both strong and delicate. Merely because I have used certain musical terms in my discussion, it should not be confused with music. Je Ne Parle Pas Français is not an imitation of a sonata. Its form is purely literary, but it has the suppleness and some of the abstractness of music.

In one part of the story Raoul Duquette speaks of discussing the modern novel. For him this discussion was equivalent to stating "the need of a new form, or the reason why our young men appeared to be just missing it." Katherine Mansfield has got hold of that new and necessary form. So far she has used it only in a short story, but there is no reason why she should not meet with the same success if she applied it to a full-length novel.

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