THE AUTHOR OF BLISS

THE GARDEN PARTY and Other Stories. *By Katherine Mansfield. 12mo. 255 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. $2.*

THERE is no doubt that the stories of Katherine Mansfield are literature. That is, their qualities are literary qualities. No one would think of dramatizing these stories, of condensing them into pithy paragraphs, or of making them into a scenario for Douglas Fairbanks. They do not dissolve into music, like Mallarmé, or materialize into sculpture like Heredia. The figures are not plastic; the landscapes are not painted, but described, and they are described, usually, through the eyes of a character, so that they serve both as a background and as a character study. In the same way Katherine Mansfield does not treat events, but rather the reflection of events in someone's mind. Her stories are literature because they produce effects which can be easily attained by no other art.

Nobody ever dies in one of her stories; nobody ever marries or is born. These pompous happenings occur off-stage, discreetly, a day before the curtain rises or a year after its descent; so do most other events on which her stories touch. If one uses the word in the sense of, let us say, J. Berg Esenwein, there is no plot; instead she tries to define a situation. That is why her stories give the effect of overflowing their frame; an event has a beginning and an end, but the consequences of a situation continue indefinitely like waves of sound or the familiar ripples of a pool. This is the effect produced by the best of her work, but actually it is nothing more than a moment out of the lives of her characters; a moment not of action but of realization, and a realization of one particular sort.

These stories, at least the fifteen contained in her second volume, have a thesis: namely, that life is a very wonderful spectacle, but disagreeable for the actors. Not that she ever states it bluntly in so many words; blunt statement is the opposite of her method. She suggests it rather; it is a sentence trembling on the lips of all her characters, but never quite expressed; it is the discovery of little Laura Sheridan, who burst into tears on the evening of her successful garden party:

" 'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life—' But what life was she couldn't explain."

The other characters come no nearer to explanation, but they discover life to be wonderful and very disagreeable, just as did little Laura Sheridan. The moment from their existence which Katherine Mansfield chooses to describe is the moment of this realization.

The method is excellent, and the thesis which it enforces is vague enough and sufficiently probable to be justified aesthetically. Only, there is sometimes a suspicion—I hate to mention it in the case of an author so delicate and so apparently just, but there is sometimes a suspicion that she stacks the cards. She seems to choose characters that will support her thesis. The unsympathetic ones are too aggressively drawn, and the good and simple folk confronted with misfortunes too undeviating; she doesn't treat them fairly.

One situation recurs constantly in her work. There is a woman: neurotic, arty, hateful, and a good, stupid man whom she constantly torments. He suffers and she laughs, and he loves her still. It is the situation which Anne Proctor explains so carefully to her suitor in Mr and Mrs Dove. She shows him her two pigeons. "The one in front, she's Mrs Dove. She looks at Mr Dove and gives that little laugh and runs forward, and he follows her, bowing and bowing. And that makes her laugh again. Away she runs and after her comes poor Mr Dove, bowing and bowing . . . and that's their whole life." Often with Katherine Mansfield that is the whole story. . . . Another situation, which she repeats rather less frequently, is that of the destruction of a woman's individuality by some stronger member of her family, as, for example, in The Daughters of the Late Colonel or in The Lady's Maid. These two situations by their recurrence give a faint air of monotony to The Garden Party.

This second volume, compared with the first, adheres more faithfully to the technique of Chekhov, and the adherence begins to be dangerous. He avoided monotonousness only, and not always, by the immense range of his knowledge and sympathy. Katherine Mansfield's stories have no such range; they are literature, but they are limited. She has three backgrounds only: continental hotels, New Zealand upper-class society, and a certain artistic set in London. Her characters reduce to half a dozen types; when she deserts

these she flounders awkwardly, and especially when she describes the Poorer Classes. Lacking a broad scope, she could find salvation in technical variety, but in her second volume she seems to strive for that no longer.

To read her first book was to make a voyage of adventure, or maybe even to open Chapman's Homer. She had borrowed a little from her English contemporaries, but not enough so that one could identify her sources. She had borrowed a great deal from Chekhov, but her characters were other and more familiar. In general the stories were her own experiments and successful experiments; that is why it was exhilarating to read them. One did not quite know what she would write next. . . . The Garden Party has answered that question. It is almost as good as Bliss, but not much different; from Katherine Mansfield it is immensely disappointing.

MALCOLM COWLEY