

Bliss and Other Stories

K. Mansfield

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While her stories in 'A German Pension' were rather conventional, by the time she wrote the ones collected in this edition, she had become much more *avant garde*, engaging in the kind of literary experiment which was very fashionable in the times, meaning just after what was known as the Great War. As experiments some work some do not. Luckily most of the stories are rather short, because in general they are unable to hold your attention for very long. Maybe they should be read with great care, as if they were puzzles and intellectual exercises to be sorted out. An author is supposed to meet her readers if not halfway at least a substantial part of the way, with Mansfield you get the impression that she is retreating from the reader, throwing up obstacles in his way to deter his pursuit. One thinks of the stories as being literary counterparts of the modern non-figurative painting that had just emerged in the scene. In particular being in the nature of cubists paintings, in which the natural order of a narrative is chopped up and randomly put together. It certainly mystifies the reader, but to what purpose? To show how clever the author is?

Nevertheless the longest story - *Prelude* - is something of a success, maybe because it is long enough to capture the imagination of the reader. It is also told in fragments, each implying something bigger, and thus with a minimum of words, although to be honest there is a lot of word-painting, trying to evoke an epic. It also reminds you of a certain type of Expressionist painting of the German school. The next story, however - *Je ne parle pas français* is simply just confusing and somewhat absurd. The other stories, most of them quit short, do not reside in memory, with one exception - *The governess* - which is told in a straight not to say conventional way and thus rather engaging in a traditional manner. A young woman for the first time on her own in the big wide world is set to travel across the channel and to take a night train to Munich, to serve as a governess to a family in Augsburg. The idea is that upon arrival she will rest for a day at a hotel close to the station and be picked up by her employer. She has been admonished to be aware of strangers and impressed upon to be wary and think of everything as potentially dangerous. In particular she is to travel in a 'female only' sleeping compartment on her train.

Upon arrival with the ferry, her belongings are quickly taken by a porter who expects payment in return for his services. She, however, is taken aback by his brashness, and refuses to part with any substantial amount of money. He demands a franc, she only gives him fractions thereof. He gets incensed, and when he returns he rips away the sign for 'ladies only' and a man enters the compartment. The man turns out to be a friendly older man, a grandfather type, and he wins her trust. So when arriving in Munich he takes care of her, escorts her to the hotel, and her luggage is carried up to her room. She does not give the porter anything though, guided by the same misery impulses as before. Then she is having a good time, and walks around the city with the old man, who having introduced himself as a *Regierungsrat* has further reassured her of his respectability. She is, however, anxious to be back at the hotel by five to meet her employer as previously arranged. In

the end the old grandfather implores her to visit his rooms, where he tries to make her drink wine, but she refuses, then he tries to kiss her, and she recoils, but not before he has planted to her horror a firm kiss on her mouth. She manages to escape to her hotel, only to find out that her employer has already been there, and the porter, getting his revenge, had told her that she had arrived with a man and gone out and he had no idea when she was expected to be back. One surmises that this was the end of it, and that she lost her employment. There is a nice nod to the fairy tale where the protagonist gets punished by not showing due respect to the seemingly insignificant. Its a nicely told moral fable, but hardly, unlike the others, very modernistic.

January 18, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se