THOMAS MANN

[1875–1955]

Thomas Mann was born in Lübeck, Germany, into a wealthy merchant family. He wrote his first novel, Buddenbrooks *(1900), as a saga chronicling the rise of the family business and exploring what was to become one of his major thematic preoccupations—the conflict between the artistic spirit and bourgeois values. Mann produced a series of important and complex novels that included* Doctor Faustus *(1947),* The Magic Mountain *(1924), and the tetralogy* Joseph and His Brothers, *based on the biblical story of Joseph. After receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929, Mann exiled himself from Germany with the rise of the Nazis, moving initially to Switzerland and then later to the United States, where he was granted citizenship in 1944.*

Disillusionment

I confess that I was completely bewildered by the conversation which I had with this extraordinary man. I am afraid that I am even yet hardly in a state to report it in such a way that it will affect others as it did me. Very likely the effect was largely due to the candour and friendliness with which an entire stranger laid himself open to me.

It was some two months ago, on an autumnal afternoon, that I first noticed my stranger on the Piazza di San Marco. Only a few people were abroad; but on the wide square the standards flapped in the light sea-breeze in front of that sumptuous marvel of colour and line which stood out with luminous enchantment against a tender pale-blue sky. Directly before the centre portal a young girl stood strewing corn for a host of pigeons at her feet, while more and more swooped down in clouds from all sides. An incomparably blithe and festive sight.

I met him on the square and I have him in perfect clarity before my eye as I write. He was rather under middle height and a little stooped, walking briskly and holding his cane in his hands behind his back. He wore a stiff black hat, a light summer overcoat, and dark striped trousers. For some reason I mistook him for an Englishman. He might have been thirty years old, he might have been fifty. His face was smooth-shaven, with a thickish nose and tired grey eyes; round his mouth played constantly an inexplicable and somewhat simple smile. But from time to time he would look searchingly about him, then stare upon the ground, mutter a few words to himself, give his head a shake and fall to smiling again. In this fashion he marched perseveringly up and down the square.

After that first time I noticed him daily; for he seemed to have no other business than to pace up and down, thirty, forty, or fifty times, in good weather and bad, always alone and always with that extraordinary bearing of his.

On the evening which I mean to describe there had been a concert by a military band. I was sitting at one of the little tables which spread out into the piazza from

Florian's café; and when after the concert the concourse of people had begun to disperse, my unknown, with his accustomed absent smile, sat down in a seat left vacant near me.

The evening drew on, the scene grew quieter and quieter, soon all the tables were empty. Hardly any strollers were left, the majestic square was wrapped in peace, the sky above it thick with stars; a great half-moon hung above the splendid spectacular façade of San Marco.

I had been reading my paper, with my back to my neighbour, and was about to surrender the field to him when I was obliged instead to turn in his direction. For whereas I had not heard a single sound, he now suddenly began to speak.

"You are in Venice for the first time, sir?" he asked, in bad French. When I essayed to answer in English he went on in good German, speaking in a low, husky voice and coughing often to clear it.

"You are seeing all this for the first time? Does it come up to your expectations? Surpasses them, eh? You did not picture it as finer than the reality? You mean it? You would not say so in order to seem happy and enviable? Ah!" He leaned back and looked at me, blinking rapidly with a quite inexplicable expression.

The ensuing pause lasted for some time. I did not know how to go on with this singular conversation and once more was about to depart when he hastily leaned towards me.

"Do you know, my dear sir, what disillusionment is?" he asked in low, urgent tones, both hands leaning on his stick. "Not a miscarriage in small, unimportant matters, but the great and general disappointment which everything, all of life, has in store? No, of course, you do not know. But from my youth up I have carried it about with me; it has made me lonely, unhappy, and a bit queer, I do not deny that.

"You could not, of course, understand what I mean, all at once. But you might; I beg of you to listen to me for a few minutes. For if it can be told at all it can be told without many words.

"I may begin by saying that I grew up in a clergyman's family, in quite a small town. There reigned in our home a punctilious cleanliness and the pathetic optimism of the scholarly atmosphere. We breathed a strange atmosphere, compact of pulpit rhetoric, of large words for good and evil, beautiful and base, which I bitterly hate, since perhaps they are to blame for all my sufferings.

"For me life consisted utterly of those large words; for I knew no more of it than the infinite, insubstantial emotions which they called up in me. From man I expected divine virtue or hair-raising wickedness; from life either ravishing loveliness or else consummate horror; and I was full of avidity for all that and of a profound, tormented yearning for a larger reality, for experience of no matter what kind, let it be glorious and intoxicating bliss or unspeakable, undreamed-of anguish.

"I remember, sir, with painful clearness the first disappointment of my life; and I would beg you to observe that it had not at all to do with the miscarriage of some cherished hope, but with an unfortunate occurrence. There was a fire at night in my parents' house, when I was hardly more than a child. It had spread insidiously until the whole small storey was in flames up to my chamber door, and the stairs would soon have been on fire as well. I discovered it first, and I remember that I went rushing through the house shouting over and over: 'Fire, fire!' I know exactly what I said and

what feeling underlay the words, though at the time it could scarcely have come to the surface of my consciousness. 'So this,' I thought, 'is a fire. This is what it is like to have the house on fire. Is this all there is to it?'

"Goodness knows it was serious enough. The whole house burned down, the family was only saved with difficulty, and I got some burns. And it would be wrong to say that my fancy could have painted anything much worse than the actual burning of my parents' house. Yet some vague, formless idea of an event even more frightful must have existed somewhere within me, by comparison with which the reality seemed flat. This fire was the first great event in my life. It left me defrauded of my hope of fearfulness.

"Do not fear lest I go on to recount my disappointments to you in detail. Enough to tell you that I zealously fed my magnificent expectations of life with the matter of a thousand books and the works of all the poets. Ah, how I have learned to hate them, those poets who chalked up their large words on all the walls of life—because they had no power to write them on the sky with pencils dipped in Vesuvius! I came to think of every large word as a lie or a mockery.

"Ecstatic poets have said that speech is poor: 'Ah, how poor are words,' so they sing. But no, sir. Speech, it seems to me, is rich, is extravagantly rich compared with the poverty and limitations of life. Pain has its limits: physical pain in unconsciousness and mental in torpor; it is not different with joy. Our human need for communication has found itself a way to create sounds which lie beyond these limits.

"Is the fault mine? Is it down my spine alone that certain words can run so as to awaken in me intuitions of sensations which do not exist?

"I went out into that supposedly so wonderful life, craving just one, one single experience which should correspond to my great expectations. God help me, I have never had it. I have roved the globe over, seen all the best-praised sights, all the works of art upon which have been lavished the most extravagant words. I have stood in front of these and said to myself: 'It is beautiful. And yet—is that all? Is it no more beautiful than that?'

"I have no sense of actualities. Perhaps that is the trouble. Once, somewhere in the world, I stood by a deep, narrow gorge in the mountains. Bare rock went up perpendicular on either side, and far below the water roared past. I looked down and thought to myself: 'What if I were to fall?' But I knew myself well enough to answer: 'If that were to happen you would say to yourself as you fell: "Now you are falling, you are actually falling. Well, and what of it?"'

"You may believe me that I do not speak without experience of life. Years ago I fell in love with a girl, a charming, gentle creature, whom it would have been my joy to protect and cherish. But she loved me not, which was not surprising, and she married another. What other experience can be so painful as this? What tortures are greater than the dry agonies of baffled lust? Many a night I lay wide-eyed and wakeful; yet my greatest torture resided in the thought: 'So this is the greatest pain we can suffer. Well, and what then—is this all?'

"Shall I go on to tell you of my happiness? For I have had my happiness as well and it too has been a disappointment. No, I need not go on; for no heaping up of bald examples can make clearer to you that it is life in general, life in its dull, uninteresting, average course which has disappointed me—disappointed, disappointed!

"What is man? asks young Werther—man, the glorious half-god? Do not his powers fail him just where he needs them most? Whether he soars upwards in joy or sinks down in anguish, is he not always brought back to bald, cold consciousness precisely at the point where he seeks to lose himself in the fullness of the infinite?

"Often I have thought of the day when I gazed for the first time at the sea. The sea is vast, the sea is wide, my eyes roved far and wide and longed to be free. But there was the horizon. Why a horizon, when I wanted the infinite from life?

"It may be narrower, my horizon, than that of other men. I have said that I lack a sense of actualities—perhaps it is that I have too much. Perhaps I am too soon full, perhaps I am too soon done with things. Am I acquainted in too adulterated a form with both joy and pain?

"I do not believe it; and least of all do I believe in those whose views of life are based on the great words of the poets—it is all lies and poltroonery. And you may have observed, my dear sir, that there are human beings so vain and so greedy of the admiration and envy of others that they pretend to have experienced the heights of happiness but never the depths of pain?

"It is dark and you have almost ceased to listen to me; so I can the more easily confess that I too have tried to be like these men and make myself appear happy in my own and others' eyes. But it is some years since that the bubble of this vanity was pricked. Now I am alone, unhappy, and a little queer, I do not deny it.

"It is my favourite occupation to gaze at the starry heavens at night—that being the best way to turn my eyes away from earth and from life. And perhaps it may be pardoned in me that I still cling to my distant hopes? That I dream of a freer life, where the actuality of my fondest anticipations is revealed to be without any torturing residue of disillusionment? Of a life where there are no more horizons?

"So I dream and wait for death. Ah, how well I know it already, death, that last disappointment! At my last moment I shall be saying to myself: 'So this is the great experience—well, and what of it? What is it after all?'

"But it has grown cold here on the piazza, sir—that I can still feel—ha ha! I have the honour to bid you a very good night."

[1896]

KATHERINE MANSFIELD

[1888–1923]

Katherine Mansfield was born in New Zealand and began writing at an early age. During her London university years she edited the school literary magazine and returned briefly to New Zealand, only to leave it permanently two years later. Living in London as a struggling writer, she drew on personal experiences for the material in her first short-story collection, In a German Pension *(1911). Meeting the critic John Middleton Murry was a turning point in her career. She reviewed and edited for him on various magazines. In 1920 her collection,* Bliss, and Other Stories, *brought her critical acclaim; three more*