

## My Memories of D. H. Lawrence

IF you wander around in bookstores you will have come upon several books about D. H. Lawrence: Mr John Middleton Murry's autobiography, Frieda Lawrence's memoirs, Keith Winter's *roman à clef* called *Impassioned Pygmies*, etc. These are all comparatively recent; a complete bibliography going back to the time of Lawrence's death would run into hundreds of items, maybe thousands. The writing man is pretty much out of it if he hasn't written something about how hard it was to understand, to talk to, and to get along generally with D. H. Lawrence; and I do not propose to be out of it. I had my difficult moments on account of the Master, and I intend to tell about them – if Mr Murry will quit talking for a moment and let me talk.

I first met D. H. Lawrence on a train platform in Italy twelve years ago. He was pacing up and down. There was no mistaking the reddish, scraggly beard, the dark, beetling eyebrows, the intense, restless eyes. He had the manner of a man who was waiting for something; in this case, I think it was the train. I had always wanted to meet the great artist and here was my golden opportunity. I finally screwed my courage up to the accosting point and I walked over and accosted him. 'D. H. Lawrence?' I said. He frowned, stopped, pulled a watch out of his vest pocket, and held it up to me so that I could see the dial. 'No speak Eyetalian,' he said. 'Look for yourself.' Then he walked away. It had been about 10.12 or 10.13 A.M. by his watch (I had 10.09 myself, but I may have been slow). Since we both got on the train that pulled into the station a few minutes later, I contrived to get into the same compartment with him and to sit down next to him. I found him quite easy to talk to. He seemed surprised that I spoke English – on the platform he had taken me for an Italian who wanted to know what time it was. It turned out after a few minutes of rather puzzling conversation that his name was George R. Hopkins and that he had never heard of D. H. Lawrence. Hopkins was a resident of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, where he had a paper factory. He wished to God he was back in the United States. He was a strong Coolidge man, thought every French person was depraved, and hadn't been able to find a decent cup of coffee in all Europe. He had a married daughter, and two sons in Penn State, and had been having trouble with a molar in his lower jaw ever since he arrived at Le Havre, some three weeks before. He wouldn't let anybody monkey with it, he said, except a certain Dr Karns in Fitchburg. Karns was an Elk and a bird-dog fancier in addition to being the best dentist in the United States.

This encounter did not discourage me. I determined to meet D. H. Lawrence before I came back to America, and eventually I sat down and wrote him

a note, asking him for the opportunity of meeting him (I had found out where he was living at the time – in Florence, I believe, though I may be wrong). I explained that I was a great admirer of his – I addressed him simply as Dear Master – and that I had some ideas about sex which I thought might interest him. Lawrence never received the letter, it transpired later, because I had unfortunately put it in the wrong envelope. He got instead a rather sharp note which I had written the same evening to a psychoanalyst in New York who had offered to analyse me at half his usual price. This analyst had come across some sketches I had made and had apparently jumped to the conclusion that it



Dr Karns

would be interesting to try to get at what was behind them. I had addressed this man in my note simply as 'sir' and I had told him that if he wanted to analyse somebody he had better begin with himself, since it was my opinion there was something the matter with him. As for me, I said, there was nothing the matter with me. This, of course, was the letter that Lawrence got, owing to the shifting of envelopes, and I was later to understand why I never heard from Lawrence and also why I kept hearing from the analyst all the time. I hung around Europe for several months waiting for a letter from Lawrence, and finally came home, in a low state of mind.

I eventually met, or rather talked with, D. H. Lawrence about six months after I got back to New York. He telephoned me one evening at my apartment. 'Hello,' I said into the transmitter. 'Hello,' a voice said. 'Is this Mr Thurber?' 'Yes,' I said. 'Well, this is D. H. Lawrence,' said the voice. I was taken back; for a moment I couldn't say a word, I was so surprised and excited. 'Well,

well,' I said, finally, 'I didn't know you were on this side.' 'This is the right side to be on, isn't it?' he asked, in a rather strained voice (I felt that he was excited, too). 'Yes, it is,' I said. 'Well,' said Lawrence, 'they turned me over on my right side because my left side hurt me so.' Thereupon he began to sing 'Frankie and Johnny'. He turned out to be a waggish friend of mine who had heard my stories about trying to get in touch with D. H. Lawrence, and was having me on.

I never did get to meet D. H. Lawrence, but this I rarely admit. Whenever I am at a cocktail-party of literary people and the subject of Lawrence comes up, I tell my own little anecdote about the Master: how he admired Coolidge, how he had trouble with his teeth, how he liked to sing 'Frankie and Johnny'. These anecdotes are gaining considerable currency and I have no doubt that they will begin to creep into biographies of the man in a short time. Meanwhile I have become what you could almost call allergic to famous writers. I suppose this is the natural outgrowth of my curious and somewhat disturbing relationship with D. H. Lawrence. I cannot truthfully say that any part of that relationship was satisfactory, and therefore I am trying to forget D. H. Lawrence, which makes me about the only writer in the world who is. It is a distinction of a sort.

## Nine Needles

ONE of the more spectacular minor happenings of the past few years which I am sorry that I missed took place in the Columbus, Ohio, home of some friends of a friend of mine. It seems that a Mr Albatross, while looking for something in his medicine cabinet one morning, discovered a bottle of a kind of patent medicine which his wife had been taking for a stomach ailment. Now, Mr Albatross is one of those apprehensive men who are afraid of patent medicines and of almost everything else. Some weeks before, he had encountered a paragraph in a Consumers' Research bulletin which announced that this particular medicine was bad for you. He had thereupon ordered his wife to throw out what was left of her supply of the stuff and never buy any more. She had promised, and here now was another bottle of the perilous liquid. Mr Albatross, a man given to quick rages, shouted the conclusion of the story at my friend: 'I threw the bottle out of the bathroom window and the medicine chest after it!' It seems to me that must have been a spectacle worth going a long way to see.

I am sure that many a husband has wanted to wrench the family medicine cabinet off the wall and throw it out of the window, if only because the average medicine cabinet is so filled with mysterious bottles and unidentifiable objects of all kinds that it is a source of constant bewilderment and exasperation to the American male. Surely the British medicine cabinet and the French medicine cabinet and all the other medicine cabinets must be simpler and better ordered than ours. It may be that the American habit of saving everything and never throwing anything away, even empty bottles, causes the domestic medicine cabinet to become as cluttered in its small way as the American attic becomes cluttered in its major way. I have encountered few medicine cabinets in this country which were not pack-jammed with something between a hundred and fifty and two hundred different items, from dental floss to boracic acid, from razor blades to sodium perborate, from adhesive tape to coconut oil. Even the neatest wife will put off clearing out the medicine cabinet on the ground that she has something else to do that is more important at the moment, or more diverting. It was in the apartment of such a wife and her husband that I became enormously involved with a medicine cabinet one morning not long ago.

I had spent the week-end with this couple - they live on East Tenth Street near Fifth Avenue - such a week-end as left me reluctant to rise up on Monday morning with bright and shining face and go to work. They got up and went to work, but I didn't. I didn't get up until about two-thirty in the afternoon. I