D. H. LAWRENCE IN NEW MEXICO

By Maurice Lesemann

WHEN I opened the door, coming in out of the blue clearness of New Mexico dusk on an October afternoon, a man stood up quickly and turned nervously toward me, looking very dark, very darkly bearded, in the firelight. But when we went in to dinner I saw that he was not so tall as I had thought, and very slight, almost frail, of body, with small shoulders and meagre arms. His head also was not large, not distinguished at all, and rather unshapely, though the reddish beard, thrusting below the chin, made it seem longer. Underneath the brow, which was wrinkled and knotted, the eyes were small and bright blue. They had weary sags beneath them. He sat as if folded in and huddled upon himself, bending over his arms, bending over his red beard. Not that he was quiet and morose — not for a moment — but I realized then, rather suddenly, what an enormous amount of writing Lawrence has done for a man of thirty-seven years, what a monstrous labor it has been, if only labor alone, without any of the desperate questioning it tells of, and the suffering.

We rode out horseback in the morning. The adobe houses of Taos were warm and golden in the sunlight as always, but now the cottonwoods and poplars too were golden for fall, and stood in thin, vibrant screens over the flat roofs and up into the blue. Out toward the Taos Pueblo the Indian fields were reaped and yellow with stubble, and the bushes by the old pueblo wagon road made a smoky mist of lavender and russet. Leaves of the wild plum trailed crimson over them. We passed Indian boys hunting birds with bows and arrows. They hid in the bushes when the ponies came close.

Lawrence was dressed in leather puttees and riding breeches; and a little white woolen coat of Scotch homespun without any collar, a strange garment in this country, with a homely northern look about it; and underneath this, a knitted sweater that a friend had made for him of the very blue to harmonize with his red beard. He was very gay in the crisp clearness of the morning. We talked about America.

This was Lawrence's first visit to America, and he was still in the midst of first impressions. He saw our machine life as an appalling thing, a very terrible thing. It would take the most intense individualism to escape the deep seated American impulse toward uniformity. All that a sensitive person could do now was to live totally to himself. "He must be himself", Lawrence said. "He must keep to *himself* and fight against all that. There is nothing else to do. *Nothing.*"

When he talked, one forgot almost at once that first impression of frailness and weariness. One forgot the heavily knotted brow under the shock and surcharge of his eyes. He spoke gaily and whimsically. His voice was high pitched and thin, soaring high upward for emphasis, and still higher in a kind of amused exultation. Talking of uniformity, he remarked upon the way Americans treat everyone with the utmost familiarity on first acquaintance. It has become a convention with us to presume an exact community of interest. He was amazed at this. "They tell you *all* of their affairs, and then they expect *you* to tell them all of yours. They make me furious! And I know that they have the kindest intentions in the world. They mean to be kindly and generous, of course. But I have the feeling of being perpetually insulted!"

He talked of it often, the condition of American life and its possible future. He felt revolution. He felt it somehow in the peculiar mental make up of our people despite their apparent docility. There was a terrible potentiality there, a disposition to join together when aroused, a sense for joining and feeling their strength together. If I took him rightly, it was a sort of child's knowledge of the possession of power. He had an intuitive fear of them and of what they might do if ever they took a notion to overturn things, either little or great. "I feel them dangerous", he said, "dangerous as a race. Far more dangerous than most of the races of Europe."

While we talked the ponies would slacken their pace, gradually, by mutual consent, dropping at last into a slow walk, scarcely placing one foot before another. We passed the Pueblo, rising in terraces into the sun, five terraces rising with golden brown walls against the dark blue peaks of mountains behind them. The Indians were husking corn in the corrals and pateos. The streets, usually swept clean as a floor, were littered with rustling husks of corn. Lawrence was always for turning out of the road and off across the fields at a gallop. He pressed his flat white hat tightly to his head and gave the little sorrel free rein, letting her go breakneck over the hardened furrows. Then back through a gap in the underbrush to the road again, the ponies excited after their run, tossing their manes.

"I should like to see the young people gather", he said, "somewhere away from the city, somewhere where living is cheap — in a place like this, for instance; and let them have a farm or a ranch, with horses and a cow, and *not* try to make it pay. Don't let them try to make it pay — like Brook Farm. That was the trouble with Brook Farm. But let them support themselves by their writing, or their painting, or whatever it is." I had been telling him of the large number of young people in America who are intent on creative work in the arts and are up against the kaleidoscopic, emotionally disintegrating life of our commercial centres. He came back again and again to this increasing problem of preserving the individual

entity. "They could be *themselves* there", he said, "and they would form a nucleus. Then they would be able gradually to spread their influence and combat the other thing a little. At least they would know they existed. . . .

"At any rate, it would be an interesting experiment."

And with the last words off he would go, urging the little mare into a lope and standing up in the stirrups. He pressed the small white hat tightly to his head and sat far forward in the saddle, leaning over eagerly. He rode eagerly. The white coat flapped behind him in the wind.

This eagerness and exultation were constant in him. One night by the fire he told stories about English people he had known, imitating with absurd nicety their voices and manner, their entire conversation. He described their way of walking, and must needs jump from his chair and pace up and down the floor — yes, all round the room, taking the part first of the Countess and then of the Cabinet Minister — until finally they rose before us — heroic, monumental in caricature. And then Lawrence would remember one thing more, and it so ridiculous that he would have to sit down; and his voice would break and go careering away into a chuckling laugh before he could tell what had overpowered him.

Small trace of humor or whimsy has appeared in his work, although there is an increasing variety of mood in the later novels. The exultation, however, so predominant in the early love poems and in the clear lyricism of "The Trespasser", still appears—most freely now perhaps in his description, or rather in his deep realization, of flowers and animals, and in his feeling for places, his whole sense of a town or a mountain. But I give you my word that these things do not greatly concern him. He is concerned for the most part with certain human relationships and with certain visions which he has had for the future. He is concerned with finding a philosophy which shall show him a rhythm running through the inconsistent truths of experience. But these other — for which alone many people read him — these come almost unconsidered out of the casual, daily abundance of his mind.

Sometimes, of course, the eagerness and the exultation were more concentrated within him, and there was less of them for the rest of us. Sometimes he was altogether inward, as if there were an actual physical change in him, a periodic withdrawal of his energies deep inside him. At such a time his remarks in criticism of people were very piercing. Very quick, darting out at them and back again. And his voice was a bit aside from us, and a bit wary; sharp, at a moment. And his eyes too were sharp, darting askance. It was almost as if he were at a distance from us in the room, conversing in his high voice at a short but distinct distance, as if he were sitting quite by himself over there beyond the table, under the small shine of the candles.

On such an evening one felt him strangely in the house. Although he talked, and talked gaily and whimsically, yet he himself was present otherwise, in some totally different way. He had an exquisite, almost physical sensitiveness to the personalities about him. Like Cicio in "The Lost Girl", and others of his most authentic characters — those who are least explained — he became then an enigmatic intuitive being: irritated darkly within by the slightest contacts, feeling them to

the point of pain, or stirred with delight in the same mordant fashion, but never ceasing, never relenting. The small blue eyes burned and danced, indestructible. He penetrated the room and its peculiar atmosphere with excruciating understanding.

"If you fall from the tower of a cathedral and your mind says that you shall die, you will *die;* and if your mind is not going to die then, you will *not* die." And I shall always remember his casual remark. For him it is true. His mind must go on without rest, creating beyond itself, thrusting out beyond itself again and again in flashes of vision. One thing, surely, he has done: although Whitman sketched the thought, Lawrence is the first modern to body forth love as one inseparable experience, not as both physical and mental, but as one — one thing; and in that one living substance of love he looks for his solution. He will do more. He will go on, searching for finality and rest. We thought that he would never find rest. And that, at last, was the sense we had of him; it came over us — the sense of a man walking about, or sitting by the fire, or picking apples in the orchard like any other, but inwardly astir with a dark frenzy, his frail body ridden and worn by his dæmon.