

"The Man Who Died"



TAOS IS A FINE MOUNTAIN TOWN, about an hour's drive from Santa Fe, New Mexico. The whole countryside is rugged, the volcanic landscape seemingly having tumbled down from the peaks of the sacred Taos Mountain. There is majesty in the scenery, and also melodrama; that, above all else, impressed D. H. Lawrence when he arrived there in 1922.

However, he found other attractions besides the view. The Taos area offered him sanctuary from the carping, small-minded world of letters which rejected him as subversive. And there was also an active Indian pueblo in which Lawrence saw fascinating glimpses of the primitive life-style which later made its way into his writing, offering a partial alternative to desiccated modern life.

Taos had all the lively ingredients of an artists' colony long before Lawrence conferred instant immortality upon the area by making it the focus of his American adventures. Although Lawrence stayed in Taos only intermittently and has been dead now for more than 35 years, one immediately senses that his legend has permanently embraced the town; it has become as crucial to its identity as the thin, mentholated air, the violent pastel sunsets and the Indians.

Lawrence came to America grudgingly, only after insistent invitations and guarantees of security from Mabel Dodge Luhan, a wealthy immigrant from Park Avenue and lioness of Taos culture in the '20s. Mrs. Luhan was one of countless women magnetically attracted to Lawrence throughout his lifetime; relationships which were usually based on a combination of sex and transcendentalism. He was, however, too seasoned a sufferer to bring many illusions with him. Shortly after arriving in Taos, he wrote back to Europe: "Everything in America goes by *will*. A great negative *will* seems to be turned against all spontaneous life—there seems to be no *feeling* at all—no genuine bowels of compassion and sympathy: all this gripped, iron, *benevolent* will, which in the end is diabolic."

These are, of course, familiar figures of speech from the apocalyptic language Lawrence adopted in his novels to preach to an age which he saw as rationally mad, a civilization whose vital juices he envisioned as drying up at the source. He wearily accepted America as a temporary but not an especially congenial refuge from the repressions and harassment that stalked his artistic life. Taos was a brief stopover on what one of Lawrence's friends called his "savage pilgrimage."

Aside from the legions of dissertation writers and scholars who migrate to Taos as if it were Mecca, the Lawrence legend has accumulated some interesting ironies over the years. There is, for instance, the cloak and dagger work that goes on between competing university libraries for the remaining relics of his literary remains. Lawrence would have found this activity sadly irrelevant, especially because the bibliophiles are after his works, not the message in them. But he would probably have been amused that Mrs. Luhan used the manuscript of *Sons and Lovers*—which she was given in exchange for her Taos ranch—to pay her psychiatrist's bill. Most ironic of all, however, is the way that Lawrence was enshrined in Taos, reigning as the town's favorite *poltergeist*. In 1935, Frieda, his wife, had his body exhumed from its grave in France and then cremated. The ashes were placed in the shrine erected to Lawrence's memory on the grounds of the ranch. Phoenix-like, Lawrence has arisen from the ashes to become a major factor in Taos' life.

PART OF THE LAWRENCE LEGEND is what the Grove Press biography—reissued with a flashy cover during the halcyon days of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—calls his "volcanic life and loves." His life was indeed explosive, but Lawrence was no Frank Harris. By and large, Frieda was the only woman in his life. Their marriage seems to have been intense and demanding enough to keep both of them busy; in Lawrence's own favorite symbolic terms, the relationship simultaneously devoured and renewed. But innumerable other women, like Mrs. Luhan, insisted on idolizing their messiah. They are all gone now—all except Dorothy Brett, whose relationship with Lawrence was the most peculiar and un-Lawrencean of all.

Brett, as she prefers to be called, was born in 1883, the daughter of Viscount Esher. From her stock of aristocratic memories she can look back on dancing lessons with Queen Victoria's grandchildren, a presentation at court before she was 20, and attendance at the coronation of Edward VII. Her family was part of the landless aristocracy which insisted upon carrying on as if the First World War hadn't permanently severed relations with Victorianism. They were shocked when Brett decided to go to art school. They were dismayed when she became a member of Lawrence's informal bohemian entourage in the '20s.

When Lawrence returned to New Mexico in 1924, Brett accompanied him and Frieda. And, except for brief trips to Mexico, England and Italy, where she last saw Lawrence in 1926, she has remained there ever since.

In the memoirs she is putting into book form, Brett says of her relationship with Lawrence: "Intuitively, I understood him. I never encroached on his life, or Frieda's with him. Yet instinctively, intuitively, I was close to him. This is what enraged Frieda. . . . Frieda's colossal femaleness bitterly hated my lack of femaleness. . . . It was not 'love' or 'being in love' that was paramount in our friendship. It was this other, deeper, more subtle thing that flashed up and gleamed between us through everything."

After Lawrence's death, Brett remained in Taos, carrying out one of his old fixations by involving herself artistically in Indian culture. She is almost Faulknerian in that she has "endured." That lack of "femaleness," one senses, may have allowed her to outlast all the others. Today, her paintings are beginning to be collector's items, primarily, one suspects, because of her intimate connection with the Lawrence saga.

Despite his basic fondness for Brett as a loyal companion and his obvious admiration for the fact that she made few demands on his already stretched spirit, Lawrence sometimes became irritated by Brett. He often refers to her in his letters as "the Brett," almost as if she were an annoying contrivance. He mentions her near-deafness in exasperation, along with her ubiquitous ear trumpet called "Toby." Toby is gone now, having long ago been replaced by a less flamboyant hearing-aid. But one feels something like Lawrence's unspecified irritation, although probably for a much different reason, toward this charming woman, whose lined, 85-year-old face is softened by a sort of implacable goodwill. When I talked to Brett recently, it struck me that, like most people who have lived history as opposed to analyzing it, she hadn't stored up much privileged information. The people she had known—including Pound, Yeats, Robinson Jeffers, Stieglitz, Stokowski and a host of others—and the historical currents

she was caught up in failed to make a lasting impression. She seems to have accepted the milieu she moved in during the '20s as passively as the weather.

The Lawrence Brett remembers was no existential hero doing epic battle with the rules. "You know," she says nostalgically, "the thing I remember most about Lawrence was that he was so charming. That's what has stayed with me all these years."

CASUALLY MIXED IN among Brett's paintings at the Manchester Galleries—of which she is co-owner along with her friend and next-door neighbor, John Manchester—is a carelessly framed painting by D. H. Lawrence. It is a fairly innocuous study of a family, all nude, and is modestly priced at \$2000. Three miles away, in the center of Taos, are six more of Lawrence's paintings, each priced at \$15,000.

Saki Karavas, an engaging Greek, owns Taos' La Fonda Hotel, as well as the Lawrence canvases. On the entrance to his building, there is a lettered placard notifying the public that the largest single collection of Lawrence's paintings is inside, and that they are the same notorious works that were confiscated by Scotland Yard in 1929 when the Warren Galleries tried to stage a showing of them in London. Visitors pay one dollar to enter Karavas' private office and view the "erotica."

Probably for many people, the experience is a let-down. The nudes aren't nearly as "erotic" as most bus terminal graffiti. Brett commented, "Neither Lawrence's painting nor his writing was really erotic in the usual sense of the word. He wasn't so much for the erotic as he was against shabbiness. Respect for the self and the body was what he was preaching.

He was against the sort of shabbiness that wanted to burn his paintings and his books." Even their present owner admits that the Lawrences don't do much for him.

Brett insisted that Lawrence "painted for relaxation, just the way that he used to do carpentry up at the ranch." It was purely a hobby; she remembers how he would dabble in her own uncompleted canvases. "He didn't have much technical skill as a painter," she says, "and hardly any pretensions."

One suspects that Lawrence's desire to rescue his paintings, when the London magistrates were considering putting them to the torch, was due more to his inability to allow English philistinism to triumph over him than to any intense investment he had in his art. "No more crucifixions, no more martyrdoms, no more *autos-da-fé* as long as time lasts, if I can help it," he wrote from the Continent during the crisis.

The paintings were eventually saved when Frieda promised to take them out of England. After her death they became the property of Angelo Ravagli, her last husband. He, in turn, sold them to Karavas, it is rumored, at a reasonably low price.

Saki Karavas has files of correspondence about his art. He seems to realize that the possession of a fragment of Lawrence has temporarily enfranchised him as an Important Man in the literary world. The University of Nottingham, near Lawrence's birthplace, would like to have the paintings, as would the University of Texas, which prides itself on having the largest collection of Lawrence memorabilia in the world. There are also letters from Playboy and Eros regarding the photographic features of the paintings. "I know they're valuable," Saki says cagily, "because Aga Khan was once interested in them." He feels that all he has to do is wait and he'll get his price. He probably will: the Lawrence market in Taos is always bull.

I Rise In Flame, Cried The Phoenix

by Tennessee Williams

A play about D. H. Lawrence
With a note by Frieda Lawrence

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A PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR: The action of this play, which is imaginary, takes place on the French Riviera where D. H. Lawrence died.

Not long before Lawrence's death an exhibition of his paintings was held in London. Primitive in technique and

boldly sensual in matter, this exhibition created a little tempest. The pictures were seized by the police and would have been burned if the authorities had not been restrained by an injunction. At this time Lawrence's great study of sexual passion, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was likewise under the censor's ban, as much of his work had been in the past.

Lawrence felt the mystery and power of sex as the primal life urge, and was the lifelong adversary of those who wanted to keep the subject locked away in the cellars of prudery. Much of his work is chaotic and distorted by tangent obsessions, such as his insistence upon the woman's subservience to the male, but all in all, his work is probably the greatest modern monument to the dark roots of creation.

—Tennessee Williams

A NOTE BY FRIEDA LAWRENCE: *This book has a beautiful title. When I read this short play, I forgot that it was supposed to be Lawrence and me; it happens in that other world where creation takes place. The theme of it is the eternal antagonism and attraction between man and woman. This was between Lawrence and me too. But the greater reality was something else. I wish I could say in convincing words what it was—it is difficult. What was it? It was so different from the ordinary everyday being-in-love, that has its limits so very soon. It was life in its freedom, its limitless possibilities, that bound us together. In our poverty the whole world with everything in it was ours. It was living every moment, not only existing day by day. All that happened was a new experience. Because of the background of death, every happen-*