

THE LETTERS OF T. E. LAWRENCE

'STRANGER,' says Arete in Lawrence's translation of the *Odyssey*, 'this have I to ask of you from myself; first, What man are you, and where from? Who gave you those clothes?' Resourceful Odysseus answered: 'It is grievous for me, O Queen, to give a connected history of my pains: the celestial gods have given me too many. Yet this I will say to meet your questioning.' 'Who gave you those clothes?' is the question many have asked at the spectacle of Lawrence in the uniform of an Aircraftsman. Here is the answer to the question and the connected history of this Odysseus' 'many pains.'

The six hundred letters given in this volume¹ form an enormous book of some eight hundred pages. They are written to bankers, statesmen, artists, children, private soldiers, Marshals of the R.A.F., M.P.s, Under-Secretaries of State; to Mr. Bernard Shaw, Lady Astor, C. M. Doughty, Mr. Noel Coward, Mrs. Thomas Hardy, and a dozen others as eminent. A single afternoon at Karachi produces four long letters, to the American typographer Bruce Rogers, H. S. Ede of the Tate Gallery, Mrs. Thomas Hardy, and E. M. Forster. Without learning the sensational and the unnecessary we have given us, probably finally, the substantial man in all his complexity. Some indeed of the letters, revealing the depths of suffering to which he subjected himself in the Army, make such painful reading that one might wonder why his friends have given them to the world. It is true that no English figure since, perhaps, Lord Byron had attained so great a 'news-value'; but this was clearly not the motive of those who loved him and have revealed his confessions to the world. Lovable and noble

¹ *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence of Arabia.* Ed. by David Garrett. (Jonathan Cape; 25/- net.)

as is the figure that emerges, the confession is a long one and there is needed a sacerdotal patience if it is going to be followed with charity to the end.

Only one of these letters, No. 421, seems to have been written consciously for literary effect, and it shows that same ability for exact, almost over-exact, description of natural phenomena which was so typical of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. One curious fact does, however, arise from a study of the book: Lawrence had attempted in the *Seven Pillars*, and had seemingly failed, to produce a great and sombre masterpiece. 'Do you remember,' he says in letter No. 164, 'my telling you once that I collected a shelf of "Titanic" books (those distinguished by greatness of spirit, "sublimity" as Longinus would call it): and that they were The Kharamazovs, Zarathustra, and Moby Dick. Well, my ambition was to make an English fourth.' This volume of his letters seems to have succeeded where, perhaps, his conscious and sustained literary work failed. The sequence of the letters forms an artistic whole, the acts of a tragedy: the early years of scholarship and archæology; the high peak of the Arabian achievement; the collapse into the deep waters of despair; the partial resolution of conflict in the later years in the R.A.F.; and the untimely death. The book is a 'core of darkness,' to use his own phrase, worthy to stand beside the grim and enormous achievements of Tolstoi and Dostoevsky.

The tragedy which the letters record is the tragedy of a great failure to rise to opportunity. Lawrence had a most brilliant mind, a tremendous ability to master the technicalities of any subject or material he was engaged upon. This he had already shown in scholarship and archæology before the War; later, during the War, when he first returned to Egypt, he sent in a report about Mesopotamia in which: 'He criticized the quality of the stones used for lithographing, the system of berthing barges alongside the quays, the inefficiency of the cranes for handling stores, the lack of system in shunting, the want of adequate medi-

cal stores . . . and, horror of horrors, he criticized the Higher Command and the conduct of the campaign in general.' After the War he speaks thus of his military efforts: 'When I took a decision, or adopted an alternative, it was after studying every relevant—and many an irrelevant—factor. Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites, standards—all were at my finger ends. The enemy I knew almost like my own side. I risked myself among them a hundred times, to *learn*.' He had also, in addition to his capacity for absorbing technique, the ability to get his ideas realized, and the talent for inspiring popular devotion. History has seen these capabilities united in another man, whose name was Bonaparte.

But Lawrence refused the high destiny to which his eagle called him. He made one incursion into politics after the disillusionment of the Peace Treaties, in 1921, when he aided Mr. Churchill to settle the problems of the Near East. After that the great leader and the superb man of action abdicated. Partly, no doubt, the physical horrors of the Arabian campaign had their effect; partly the denial of Arabian rights at Paris in 1919 sickened him; but mainly it seems that the scholar and writer got the better of his superb capacities to be a man of action. He was over-cultured, over-sensitive. Apart from his longing to write a masterpiece, he felt that he could no longer accept the responsibility which a great political role would have involved, the responsibility of directing other men's lives: 'the life of politics wearied me out, by worrying me over-much. I've not got a coarse-fibred enough nature for them: and have too many scruples and an uneasy conscience. It's not good to see two sides of a question, when you have (officially) to follow one.' And so lesser men were left to perform the post-war tasks which he might have shouldered.

With this political abdication in mind and with the intent not only to write a worthy record of a great adven-

ture, but also to create a tremendous final masterpiece, he began to work upon the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. The task appears to have broken him; he felt that he had completely failed, and could henceforth only bear to occupy a menial position. He changed his name and entered, in 1922, the ranks of the R.A.F. The *Seven Pillars*, he says, had gone 'through four versions in the four years I struggled with it, and I gave it my nights and days until I was nearly blind and mad. The failure of it was mainly what broke my nerve, and sent me into the R.A.F.' 'It's hard,' he says in another place, 'to squeeze the last drop out of your memories of two years, and I sweated myself blind trying to make it as good as possible. Result that I leap into the air when spoken to unexpectedly, and can't reply a word: only stand there shivering!' The R.A.F., however, provided an unexpected inspiration: 'I grew suddenly on fire with the glory which the air should be, and set to work full steam to make the others vibrate to it like myself. I was winning, too, when they chucked me out'—for the publicity attendant on Lawrence's discovery in the ranks was too much for the authorities, and he had to leave. Lawrence then proceeded to join the Tank Corps, also as a private, and it is at this point that the book swings down to its most sombre depths. In a terrible series of letters to Mr. Lionel Curtis he says: 'Seven years of this will make me impossible for anyone to suggest for a responsible position, and that self-degradation is my aim. I haven't the impulse and the conviction to fit what I know, to be my power of moulding men and things': the letters at this point touch the very verge of insanity. He loathed the Army and its brutality; he longed for a return to the R.A.F., and in 1925 permission for him to rejoin it came just in time (so letter No. 275 would indicate) to save him from suicide. He went back to the Air Force, and was shortly transferred to India.

The many long and discursive letters from India show a definite relaxation of spirit, the beginnings of a return to

normality. His desire to sink himself in the crowd was, of course, futile. Before he left Karachi he had completely reorganized the procedure of engine-overhauling in the aerodrome. But there are relics of the old tension, strange self-prohibitions, such as never to go to the canteen and never, during the four years he was to be in India, to leave the bounds of the camp at Karachi. Actually he was transferred after a time to Miranshah on the Afghan Border, where again his reputation pursued him, giving rise to strange rumours, and in 1929 he was transferred again to England.

Here we come, at last, to the happiest portion of Lawrence's life. An activity came the way of this 'resourceful Odysseus' in which he found scope for the exercise of his marvellous technical talents. Together with a small group of engineers he had, by the time he left the Air Force, completely revolutionized the building, equipment and running of the speed-boats which the R.A.F. use for auxiliary services. As he says, the boats as he left them 'have (power for power) three times the speed of their predecessors, less weight, less cost, more room, more safety, more seaworthiness.' The boats are still being copied far and wide. Together with this extraordinary engineering achievement grew an appreciation of the type of men who made it possible. 'Progress to-day,' says Lawrence, 'is made not by the single genius, but by the common effort. To me it is the multitude of rough transport drivers, filling all the roads of England every night, who make this the mechanical age. And it is the airmen, the mechanics, who are overcoming the air'—not the flying aces. This admiration was extended to their moral as well as their technical qualities. The men among whom he lived were a constant inspiration to him, and he tried to give back to the new service a feeling of self-respect by showing them what it meant to him. 'I am astonished,' he says, 'at the chance given to us. For thousands of years nature has held the mastery of the last element in her lap, patiently waiting

for our generation, and you and I are of the lucky ones chosen.' So strong an effect had this inspiration upon his own self-respect that we actually find him in 1933 proposing to resign from the R.A.F. unless he could be given some job commensurate with his abilities. It is a far cry from his 'seven years of this will make me impossible to suggest for any responsible position, and that self-degradation is my aim.' But he still proposed, on retiring from the R.A.F., to become a night-watchman in a City bank if he had not enough money to live on; if he had enough, he would retire to privacy at his tiny cottage in Dorset. He left, for the second alternative, in the early part of 1935, and three months later he was dead.

The great names of England are numerous in the pages of these letters; but few, if any, bear the name of God. It is scarcely possible to find a trace of religion in the expression of this brilliant, humane and suffering mind. The Parable of the Talents must form a moving commentary on his attempted 'self-degradation,' on his refusal to use his great abilities in a commensurate field of action; but indeed, the responsibilities he shrunk from are only tolerable to one who feels that all human authority is derived from God. Comparing his self-inflicted suffering in the army with the asceticism of the Theban Desert ('it seems almost to strip the sainthood from Anthony'), he shows a complete lack of understanding of the motive of Christian self-denial. 'Ecce reliquimus omnia'—yes; *but*—'secuti sumus Te.' One must say that he never, in these letters, shows any sense at all of that overmastering love of God which alone makes the life of renunciation permissible, that love of God which would either have given him a higher plane upon which to exercise his talents, or would have given him the heroic resolution to accept responsibilities before which his over-sensitive nature trembled. And so the tragedy swings to its close, the tale, as he puts it, of a 'unicorn in a racing stable.' He accomplished much in his endeavour to raise the morale of the Air Force, and

much in the technical task to which he set himself: but it is as if Napoleon had contented himself with the perfecting of the French artillery. Sir Ronald Storrs, in his *Orientalisms*, tells how, during the last three weeks of Lawrence's life, a tit used to flutter up and down outside any window of his cottage where he might be sitting. The bird got on Lawrence's nerves and finally a friend shot it during his absence—at the very hour when Lawrence swerved on his motor-cycle and was fatally injured. The tiny bird might symbolize the miniature world upon which he had lavished his vast talents, instead of that great sphere over which his imperial pinions should have soared and reigned.

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