

Materia Non Medica

Unforgettable night

It happened many years ago, on "the roof of Africa," in the heart of Basutoland, where I had started a medical outpost. There was a Roman Catholic Mission with one or two priests and a few nuns a couple of miles from my post, the trading station, and my wife and I.

I had returned from a sick visit on horseback—just in time. Night was falling, thunder had been rumbling on my way back, and now the storm broke: flash upon flash, crack after crack, and the roar of tons of water fusing into one monstrous bedlam. My wife and I were standing at the window of our hut watching this terrifying spectacle.

Suddenly, a few children jumped into sight out of this inferno, ashen-faced with terror, shrieking: "Morena, come quick, help, the church is burning," and vanished. What to do? But hardly had the children vanished when another batch emerged screaming: "Morena, come, c-o-m-e, the Father is very ill," and disappeared too. At that moment my assistant came racing along with two horses; I grabbed my bag, jumped on one, and off we galloped.

At the Mission the roof of the church was ablaze, the bell was tolling, and a crowd of women and children was chanting prayers. The wailing nuns took me to the house of the priest. The young man was lying on a couch, still in his wet garments. I shouted for hot-water bottles and had him undressed: there was no pulse, no respiration. I had him put down on the floor and attempted resuscitation.

Meanwhile I heard the story. The priest had been reading his breviary a few hundred yards from the church, apparently not noticing the imminent breaking of the storm. With the first gust he ran for shelter, but he was drenched by the time he reached the church. Hardly had he entered—standing there, the perfect lightning conductor—when lightning struck the roof and him. The nuns who had been praying at the back of the church witnessed his electrocution in horror.

I estimated that at least 30 minutes had elapsed between the strike and my arrival. Although reason told me that the priest was beyond human help I could not accept this verdict unchallenged but continued my efforts with the help of volunteers. After hours of fruitless toil I admitted defeat. At dawn we trudged home.

The week before the young priest had come to my surgery hut for a check-up; he told me he believed, nay was convinced, that he would die young—K M FRANZISS (Pietersburg, South Africa).

Roman revelations

The glory of Rome from our point of view was its weeds. One got tired of beauty but never of that juxtaposition of miraculously white marble, red ochre brick, and the unkempt wildness of so many corners of the Forum and the Palatine Hill. In these places, so full of evocative associations that there is a danger of being oppressed rather than stimulated by history, the discovery of new varieties of wild flower is a relief. Long may the authorities there be less than perfect in their preservation of ancient monuments. But then Rome is full of the unexpected. Take Nero's Golden House, for instance. Our first exploration proved so frustrating that we discovered the entrance only when it was too late for entry that day. This monument to Nero's grandiose self-indulgence is today buried underground. No one had told us. Our eventual discovery of the maze of massive hidden rooms

was made doubly fascinating by a guide who was also something of an evangelist. "There," she said, "is where Nero collected, for sacrificial purpose, the blood of bulls in his silver bowls. Here is where St Paul stood undaunted before him with the Christian message." The moral was obvious. She also pointed out the delicate and impressionistic wall paintings of Fabulus, much admired later by Michelangelo and Raphael. Their discovery of these in the "grottoes" was indeed the origin of the term "grotesque." Such are the delights of a holiday—new wild flowers, new words, new insights into the endless kaleidoscope of man and nature—S L HENDERSON SMITH (general practitioner, Huddersfield).

Lawrence the enigma

"I think books take in something of your personality, and your environment also . . . a second-hand book sometimes is so much more flesh and blood than a new one—and it is almost terrible to think that your ideas, yourself in your books, may be giving life to generations of readers after you are forgotten." So wrote T E Lawrence in 1910, several years before he was made famous as Lawrence of Arabia. It is taken from a second-hand copy of his *Collected Letters*, my latest acquisition.

Lawrence was a man of mystery, primarily because of his own actions. His masterpiece, the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, took eight years to write. He would not allow the complete version to be openly published in his lifetime, for he felt it too revealing. Yet its epilogue, where we at last hope to find the force that had driven him relentlessly through the years of privation in the desert, simply says, "The strongest motive throughout had been a personal one, not mentioned here, but present to me, I think, every hour of these two years." From the obscure biblical quotation of the title, the mysterious dedication to SA ("a person now dead, regard for whom lay beneath my labour for the Arabic peoples. I don't propose to go into details thereupon."), to the epilogue we have the continual question: Why?

After the war he enlisted in the RAF and the Royal Tank Corps, living in barracks and refusing promotion. While in Karachi for three years with the RAF he never left the camp once—a striking comparison with the young undergraduate who had cycled over 2000 miles through France and walked 1100 miles alone through the Syrian desert to visit the Crusader Castles. It is almost as if he was living his life in reverse, experience confusing rather than maturing him.

He dreaded old age. Maugham tells how he would ride his motor-bike, Boanerges (almost his only post-war passion apart from reading), at excessive speed, as if he wished to die while he was still in full possession of his powers. His death wish came true on 13 May 1935: he came off his motor-cycle after swerving to avoid two cyclists, received severe head injuries, and died in a coma five days later.

His life can be seen as a continual straining against his own self-perceived imperfections. He regretted his flesh and blood, indeed regretted that man had any material essence. When in the Tank Corps he wrote, "It's terrible to hold myself voluntarily here; and yet I want to stay here until it no longer hurts me: till the burnt child no longer feels the fire." He also hated the sensuality of his fellows, "as carnal as were their ancestors before Plato and Christ and Shelley and Dostoevsky taught and thought." Ultimately we may perhaps see Lawrence's life as one long struggle to deny the animal and accept as reality only the anima—I C MCMANUS (research student, Cambridge).