

## **Louis Battye.**

Born 1923 at Holmfirth, Yorkshire: permanently disabled by a congenital neuro-muscular condition; educated at Chailey Heritage, Sussex. Began to Write soon after leaving school in 1939. Sold first short story to London Opinion in 1942. Wrote over 120 stories, poems and articles with little success, and three unpublished novels. Was commissioned by Secker and Warburg to write a volume of autobiography, *I Had a Little Nut Tree*; this was followed by two novels, *Cornwall Road*, and *The Narrow Shore*, for the same publishers. Is now working to finish another novel, still untitled.

Takes writing seriously, though not necessarily solemnly. Is generally anarchistic in outlook, but is unashamedly uncommitted ideologically, believing that creative writers should be indifferent to politics if they are properly to do their job - the imaginative exploration of human truth. Has no strong views on the colour question, capital punishment, homosexual law reform, etc., and feels under no moral obligation to have them. Admires the best of D. H. Lawrence, but considers much of his work to be inept, vulgar and boring. Uses physical disability in his fiction as a metaphor for the human situation. Would rather be a poet.

## **The Chatterley Syndrome**

**(Chapter 2 in Hunt, P. (ed.) 1966: *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, London: Geoffrey Chapman).**

'HAVING SUFFERED so much, the capacity for suffering had to some extent left him. He remained strange and bright and cheerful, almost, one might say, chirpy, with his ruddy, healthy-looking face, and his pale-blue, challenging bright eyes. His shoulders were broad and strong, his

hands were very strong. He was expensively dressed, and wore neckties from Bond Street. Yet still in his face one saw the watchful look, the slight vacancy of the cripple.'

It is in these rather carelessly chosen words that D. H. Lawrence first describes Sir Clifford, Lady Chatterley's paraplegic husband, on the second page of his notorious novel.<sup>1</sup> Out of all the flood of words that, since the famous trial of 1960, have lapped and gurgled round this book, comparatively few have been devoted to the man whose war-smashed body and consequent impotence caused his fair wife to seek - and find - consolation in his game-keeper's earthy embrace; nevertheless, I feel a sharp though sympathetic look at Sir Clifford, and his creator's attitude towards him, might reveal several things of interest, especially to his fellow cripples. (I prefer the old, blunt but accurate word 'cripple' to clumsy euphemisms such as 'disabled person', and at the risk of causing offence I intend to use it throughout this essay. By it I mean an adult of normal intelligence who, through disease or injury, has been deprived in part or in full of the use of his limbs, particularly his legs, and whose condition is static and incurable. I say 'adult of normal intelligence' because I do not wish here to discuss the quite separate problems of crippled children and the mentally affected.)

It will, I think, be generally agreed that the brief description of Sir Clifford which I have quoted is a reasonably fair and accurate sketch of a common type of paraplegic, the hitherto strong and healthy young man who as a result of cruel injury has been condemned to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, the only hint of criticism being in the phrase about 'the slight vacancy of the cripple'. In this passage Lawrence's bias against the crippled is well under control; indeed, one feels he is almost leaning over backwards to be fair, even sympathetic. For Lawrence's

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<sup>1</sup> Penguin Books 1960

irrational 'philosophy' of the physical, the sensual and the intuitive deeply prejudiced him against the physically abnormal. This is not the place to speculate on the underlying psychological reasons for his adoption of his highly personal phallic mystique, though it is distinctly possible that, as in the case of Nietzsche, it was a form of compensation for his own physical inadequacy - he was a weedy neurotic consumptive.

The admirably detached attitude towards Sir Clifford which we have noted continues for several pages. On page 16 we read: 'But his very quiet, hesitating voice, and his eyes, at the same time bold and frightened, assured and uncertain, revealed his nature. His manner was often offensively supercilious, and then again modest and self-effacing, almost tremulous.' The portrait is beginning to take on depth. 'Offensively supercilious?' Well, he is after all a member of the English landed gentry, one of the many sub-divisions of the human race to arouse Lawrence's disapproval. But the note of comparatively sympathetic detachment is about to change. Very soon, after an account of how little contact Sir Clifford has with the miners who work down his colliery, we find: 'He was remotely interested; but like a man looking down a microscope, or a telescope. He was not in touch. He was not in actual touch with anybody. .. Connie [his wife] felt that she herself didn't really, not really touch him; perhaps there was nothing to get at ultimately; just a negation of human contact.' Note how the sympathy is already beginning to shift from husband to wife, from the cripple himself to the woman whose sexual and emotional frustration he is responsible for.

Even Sir Clifford's attempt to fulfil himself by becoming a writer is neatly turned against him. 'He had taken to writing stories; curious, very personal stories about people he had known. Clever, rather spiteful, and yet, in some mysterious

way, meaningless. The observation was extraordinary and peculiar. But there was no touch, no actual contact. It was as if the whole thing took place in a vacuum. And since the field of life is largely an artificially-lighted stage today, the stories were curiously true to modern life, to the modern psychology, that is.' It is pretty clear by now that he is going to have a struggle to do anything right. 'Clifford was almost morbidly sensitive about these stories. He wanted everyone to think them good, of the best, *ne plus ultra*. They appeared in the most modern magazines, and were praised and blamed as usual. But to Clifford the blame was torture, like knives goading him. It was as if the whole of his being were in his stories.' This is a very significant passage. It reveals simultaneously Lawrence's remarkable insight and his equally remarkable prejudice. As every cripple who has tried seriously to write knows only too well, the temptation indeed, the necessity -to try to put 'the whole of his being' into his work is inevitable, in spite of the agony and struggle it costs him: one thinks of Denton Welch lying for years in a hospital bed, striving, by means of his beautiful, anguished books, to create art and meaning out of a shattered life.

But all this cuts no ice with Lawrence. The implication is that " the whole of Sir Clifford's being is so insignificant it can be contained within a handful of clever, superficial stories. Even the wretched Latin tag is a sneer, Sir Clifford's perfectly natural though perhaps somewhat pathetic craving for success being for his creator something childish and contemptible.

And so it goes on, this process of denigration. At first with relative moderation and subtlety, then with increasing crudeness and brutality, Sir Clifford is reduced from an intelligent, talented man to something almost sub-human. I could fill the entire space at my disposal with examples of this process, from the quotation marks when we are told

that he is 'working' to Mellors's elegant statement that his employer has 'no balls' and the even more elegant assertion by Sir Malcolm Reid, Connie's father, that his son-in-law is 'a lily-livered hound with never a fuck in him.' Finally, after Connie has informed her husband that she is going to leave him, he becomes 'a hysterical child', and even the village nurse who has been engaged to look after him and to whom he turns emotionally after his wife's desertion, despises and hates him. 'He was to her the fallen beast, the squirming monster. ... The merest tramp was better than he.' The work of demolition is complete. My excuse for devoting so much space in what is supposed to be an essay on the problems of the physically handicapped to a consideration of a grotesque book by a remarkable but wildly over-estimated author is that, as I suggested earlier, it might reveal several interesting and relevant points for discussion. I hope to show that it has.

## II

Although the general reaction of an intelligent cripple to a reading of Lady Chatterley's Lover might well be anything from boredom to ecstasy, it would be surprising if Lawrence's treatment of Sir Clifford failed to rouse in him a feeling of resentful indignation. But it would be far better to keep this natural indignation in check and to try to consider the matter carefully and dispassionately. Let us begin by studying Sir Clifford in the context of the novel as a whole. The theme of the healthy, attractive young wife who finds herself tied to an impotent invalid who she abandons for a healthy, virile lover is not only a perfectly allowable subject for literature, it is a situation of enormous personal interest for most cripples, and one that is actually happening every day. There must be hardly a chronic ward or residential home that hasn't a crippled patient who is there simply because his or her marriage

partner has given up the physical and emotional struggle and walked out. This situation can, of course, be looked at from more than one angle, but it will be agreed that it is a sad one, even tragic. From the point of view of a novelist, either detached and Godlike towards his characters or involved almost to the point of total identification with just one of them, and at the same time concerned to transmute his raw material into art, a reasonable attitude towards the Chatterley triangle might be: 'Here is a tragic situation. A well-to-do and hitherto healthy young man is badly crippled by war. His beautiful wife still loves him and does all she can for him, but his injuries have rendered him impotent, thus depriving her of any sexual life. In spite of her loyalty, her health and looks begin to suffer. The psychological after-effects of her husband's injuries now make him appear cooler towards her, which increases her suffering. In this state of mind she allows herself to be seduced by an employee and then falls in love with him and he with her, in spite of the class barrier between them. She is torn between her -loyalty to her husband and her passion for her lover. After great agony of mind she eventually decides to leave her husband, who she considers no longer really needs her, and to go to live with her lover. Although her action is indefensible from the standpoint of conventional morality, she is also the victim of a situation she found intolerable, therefore she shouldn't be condemned. Indeed, compassion is called for towards all three chief characters, particularly the unfortunate husband. The moral - if you must have one - might be an indictment of war, or simply 'Well, that's life. ...'

But Lawrence's attitude is completely different. The whole book is, in effect, a pagan hymn to physical love, an illustration of his mystical belief in salvation through sex. Sex is good, a feeble broken body an insult to the dark gods. When Sir Clifford's body was smashed he

automatically ceased to be a man. The essential sexual relationship between himself and his wife having been destroyed, he was from then on defrauding her of her birthright; his attempt to replace this lost physical relationship with an abstract tenderness being, in Lawrence's view, not only a vile insult, a supreme gesture of contempt, but a kind of blasphemy. Sir Clifford should have died from his wounds; he had no right to have survived in his repulsive condition. He richly deserved all he got:

We have arrived at last at the heart of the matter. For, disregarding his instinctual phallic mystique, what is Lawrence's attitude towards Sir Clifford but a highly idiosyncratic restatement of the age-old half-conscious fear and hatred of the cripple, the hunchback, the dwarf- the primitive belief that a weak, malformed and ugly body probably enshrines a weak, malformed and ugly soul? Literature and folklore are full of misshapen villains, from the wicked dwarfs of mythology to the modern thriller's sinister criminal mastermind, planning particularly nasty murders in his wheelchair. Even in serious history the physically abnormal are seldom given the benefit of the doubt: modern historians are divided as to whether Richard III really did murder the Princes in the Tower, but he was a hunchback, therefore it can be assumed that he was capable of such an atrocity. Although he didn't realize it, Lawrence was merely echoing a mindless superstition that is at least as old as civilization.

'So that's why Lady Chatterley took a lover,' the intelligent cripple might say with a wry grin at this point. 'We're archetypal villains - no wonder we receive the Chatterley treatment! But surely there has been enormous progress in medical and social thinking during the last hundred-and-fifty years. The attitude of society towards us has undergone a complete revolution. Lawrence may or may

not have been a literary genius: he was certainly a reactionary thinker, a strange kind of intellectual Luddite. Surely what he wrote about a crippled character in an absurd erotic fantasy is of no relevance to the question of our position in modern society, or to the psychological and spiritual problems we each have to face as best we can.'

The answer, I'm afraid, is that it is of considerable relevance. For the harsh truth is that the basis of Lawrence's attitude towards Sir Clifford is not all irrational prejudice, the ancient popular attitude towards the physically abnormal, not all mindless superstition. Somewhere deep inside us is the almost unbearable knowledge that the way the able-bodied world regards us is as much as we have the right to expect. We are not full members of that world, and the vast majority of us can never hope to be. If we think otherwise we are deluding ourselves. Like children and the insane, we inhabit a special sub-world, a world with its own unique set of referents. Although it has correspondences and communications with that greater world within which it is encapsulated, it is not the same world nor even co-extensive with it: it is within-lesser, weaker, poorer. And at the same time dependent upon it. Let us, who inhabit this sub-world, try to see ourselves as clearly as possible.

### III

'What a piece of work is man!' marvelled Hamlet, though perhaps he was being ironic. However one rates the human species, a man must be considered as a whole. His body is an incredibly wonderful piece of fully automated engineering, but in itself it is not a man. His mind, soul, spirit is an even more wonderful and complex thing, but in itself it still does not constitute a man. To make a man you must put the two together. He is more than the mere sum of these parts, but a deficiency in one

means a deficiency in the whole. Lawrence's view that after Sir Clifford became a cripple he was no longer a man is extreme, but it contains more truth than we may like to admit. A cripple is still a man, but, as it were, on a smaller scale. His totality is diminished, his image distorted. He is not a whole.

It inevitably follows, then, that there must always be this barrier of difference and distortion between us and the inhabitants of the normal world. No matter how close our individual relationships with our able-bodied friends may seem, it is impossible for them to have the same kinds of relationship with us that they can have with others from their own world. This is perhaps the bitterest truth of all, the one that most of us find the hardest to accept - that we are forever barred from the deepest and most intimate levels of human intercourse. I can already hear the shocked cries of denial: 'He never thinks of me as being a cripple!' Not consciously, perhaps, but in his innermost heart he knows you are, and he always will. It is this fundamental unconscious knowledge, rather than sexual frustration or the sheer struggle of looking after a badly crippled partner, that breaks up so many marriages between the inhabitants of these two worlds. There are barriers that even love cannot penetrate - always assuming there can be complete love between a complete person and an incomplete one, which I doubt. (In parenthesis, it might be objected that this gloomy theory appears to break down when one considers the blind. According to my argument, the blind, lacking one of the most important and valuable of faculties, are as incomplete as the crippled, and, like them, must be separated from the normal world; yet marriages between the blind and the sighted seem on the whole to be as happy and permanent as those between two sighted people. The answer would seem to be that a great many blind people never leave the normal world, which

continues to accept them to a much greater extent than it accepts us. For some obscure Jungian reason, blindness hasn't the same sinister associations that physical abnormality has in the collective unconscious: indeed, it has strong associations with poetry and wisdom-blind poets and sages abound in history and legend.)

#### IV

We must now make an important distinction between the two great divisions of cripples: those who were normal until they reached adult age, perhaps being married and becoming parents, even achieving some measure of worldly success before their personal disaster occurred; and those who were 'born that way' or who became cripples during childhood. Normal people often speculate on which state is worse-never to have known the full richness and physical joys of normal life and so perhaps never really to miss them; or to be cruelly deprived of them while in one's prime, but having a rich store of memories to provide a degree of consolation during the long years of frustration and suffering that may lie ahead. This is one of those 'chicken-or-egg' questions which it is impossible to answer, though, as a congenital cripple, my personal guess is that those in the other group probably have the worse deal. What is certain is that each group's basic outlook on life is bound to differ. An example of the 'disaster' group could again be Sir Clifford Chatterley, though in some ways he was luckier than many. He had studied at Cambridge and Bonn, and had enjoyed the usual pursuits of his age and class. We are told that he and Connie lived on 'a rather inadequate income' after his discharge from hospital; nevertheless he was the Squire of Wragby Hall and the owner of a colliery, even if the mining industry was then going through hard times. He was also the possessor of considerable literary talent with which he earned a fair amount of artistic and commercial

success. He was, in fact, well enough off not only to be able to live comfortably without any real financial worries, but also able to afford all the gadgets and nursing assistance he might need. In spite of the National Health Service, rehabilitation schemes, Remploy, and Governmental provision of invalid cars, there must be many paraplegics today who would be quite willing to change places with him, gamekeeper or no.

The first reaction of an intelligent and spirited young adult, after he has recovered from the shock of his disaster, is a grim urge to fight back, to try to pick up the pieces of his broken life and rebuild it, either modelling the new structure as closely as possible on the old, or trying to design a completely fresh one better adapted to his new limitations. He wants to earn his own living, to resume supporting his dependents: if it is impossible for him to continue in his old job he must find another, perhaps being trained to acquire new skills. He wants to learn afresh how to cope with the physical details of everyday life, to get into and out of bed or on and off the lavatory seat, to wash, bathe, shave and dress himself without assistance - all those mundane but essential actions which, until his disaster, he had performed with scarcely a conscious thought, but which he now finds demand hitherto unimaginable physical and mental efforts. Above all he wants to resume his former social, sexual and emotional life, to return to his former status in society, to re-create the old image of himself. The fact that so many do manage to construct viable existences out of the wreckage of their lives is a vivid illustration of human adaptability and courage. But the cripple will never succeed in fully recovering the life he has lost; he will never really manage to re-create his former image. Even those who love him most will now regard him in a new way: love will inevitably be adulterated with pity. He has been transferred to the sub-world. 'Clifford looked at

Connie, with his pale, slightly prominent blue eyes, in which a certain vagueness was coming. He seemed alert in the foreground, but the background was like the Midlands atmosphere, haze, smoky mist. And the haze seemed to be creeping forward. So when he stared at Connie in his peculiar way, I giving her his peculiar, precise information, she felt all the background of his mind filling up with mist, with nothingness. And it frightened her. It made him seem impersonal, almost to idiocy.' And a page or two later: 'When Clifford was roused, he could still talk brilliantly and, as it were, command the future ... But the day after, all the brilliant words seemed like dead leaves, crumpling up and turning to powder, meaning really nothing, blown away on any gust of wind. They were not the leafy words of an effective life, young with energy and belonging to the tree. They were the hosts of fallen leaves of a life that is ineffectual.' Words like 'meaningless,' 'nothingness,' 'nonsense' are repeatedly used about him in his writing; and perhaps cruellest of all: 'Really, if you looked closely at Clifford, he was a buffoon, and a buffoon is more humiliating than a bounder.' The Master of Wragby has been banished to the sub-world with a vengeance!

In contrast, the congenital cripple or the one whose disaster occurs during childhood never suffers this painful expulsion from the normal adult world because he has never lived in it. He passes straight from the sub-world of childhood to the sub-world of the cripple. He will nowadays probably go to a special school where a more or less optimistic attempt will be made to 'fit him for life' by teaching him some vocational skill in addition to the usual school subjects. I have often wondered how many children trained in this way eventually do earn their own livings by practising the skills they were taught: not a large proportion, I suspect. Unlike the member of the other group, he has no really overwhelming incentive to be

rehabilitated because essentially there is nothing to rehabilitate, no old life to rebuild, no former image to recreate. Of course, if he is intelligent he will have ambition, he will want to earn his own living and 'live a normal life' - he may even have hopes of marriage. But only the most determined and capable-and the luckiest-ever achieve anything approaching their ambitions: the going is too tough, the incentives are too theoretical. At the special boarding school where I was taught during the Thirties, we were often warned by the staff that in order to compete with normal people we would have to be better at our jobs than they, for faced with a choice between a crippled applicant and an able-bodied one of equal skill, a prospective employer would always choose the latter (in general this still holds good, even with current quota regulations, which many firms succeed in evading). We would nod soberly, but somehow the information never really seemed to enter our bones, to become an organic part of our ambitions: like our incentives, it was too theoretical, too abstract. I think we felt in our hearts that the world didn't really expect us to earn our own livings; that if we did it would be mildly pleased and say how clever we were, but that if we didn't it would be neither surprised nor disappointed, and would be quite willing to "keep" us alive in some fashion. Even in pre-welfare times the cripple was generally expected to beg rather than to work.

The least abstract and theoretical incentive the adolescent cripple possesses is the sexual one: his glands have undergone the normal disturbances, he suffers the normal torments and dreams the normal dreams. Unless he is particularly unattractive, he probably won't have much difficulty in acquiring a girl friend, her feelings towards him largely genuine enough but inevitably containing a certain amount of pity and curiosity. He may be deeply in love and think he has detected signs of a similar feeling in her, and

the relationship may reach quite a high level of mutual affection as the girl's original curiosity is satisfied and she learns to appreciate him for his qualities as an individual; but pity will rarely be entirely eliminated. Eventually a climax will be reached, a crisis, after which the affair will either plane down to a lower, more realistic level, or-and this is much more likely - stop abruptly. He will console himself by thinking that this kind of thing happens to everybody, crippled or not, and that there are other fish in the sea. But although one or two more may swim into his net, the odds are overwhelming that they will swim out again, and bitterly he will begin to realize that he is in for the lonely, perverted life of the enforced celibate.

For the congenital cripple even more than for the member of the 'disaster' group, it is almost inevitable, unless he is as well off as Sir Clifford Chatterley, that sooner or later, he will find himself a patient in the chronic ward of a long-stay hospital, surrounded by the old, the incontinent and the dying. Because he is still comparatively young, he will generally find that the staff are sympathetic and kind, perhaps even indulgent, towards him - they will quite often break the rules (which in any case are usually more flexible and human than in an acute hospital) to give him some small extra comfort or pleasure. But the atmosphere of the workhouse, like the smell of disease, defaecation and death, still tends to hang round these places, and if he remains there he will in time succumb to it and become dull and apathetic, his life circumscribed by the petty, tedious, sordid routine of a place designed for a quite different type of patient: he will become, in a word, institutionalized. And the longer he remains there, the more institutionalized he will become. It is not unknown for people to spend forty years in such prisons.

He may, however, be luckier and get a place in one of the small residential homes that in recent years have been

opened for the care of the severely disabled. Here he will find on the surface a far different atmosphere, informal and homelike. The authorities and staff will be friendly and helpful, and treat him as an individual: he will receive greater freedom, eatable food and many small luxuries. But unless he fights a constant battle to retain his intellectual integrity and sense of purpose, as the years go by he will gradually feel the atmosphere of the place closing in on him, as it did in the chronic ward, shrinking his horizons to the limits of the house and grounds, a condition in which trivial details of the home's day-to-day routine assume a disproportionate importance. In spite of efforts to arouse or retain his interest in life, he will feel boredom and apathy creeping over him like a slow paralysis, eroding his will, dulling his critical wits, dousing his spirit, killing his independence. The temptation to sit day after day, year after year, with the same little clique in the same corner of the same room, doing the same things, thinking the same thoughts, making and listening to the same banal remarks, becomes almost irresistible. In a subtler, more civilized way than in the chronic ward, he will have become institutionalized. The difference between a residential home, however comfortable, and a chronic ward is really only one of degree, not of kind: at the bottom they are both places where one simply wastes away the time until death—dead ends in an all too literal sense; and no amount of benevolent idealism, skilled care, homelike surroundings, good food, entertainments, outings, Christmas parties and occupational therapy can disguise this melancholy fact.

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And so, however he came to be in it, the cripple, the physically underprivileged man, lives in his underprivileged sub-world, the world in which all his actions are strangely distorted and diminished in scale

and significance, so that in some ways they seem like incompetent and slightly ridiculous parodies of the real thing. When doing something that is not normally attempted by the severely disabled, I have personally experienced the highly disturbing, almost Kafka-esque sensation that I am merely going through the motions of this particular act, that what I am doing does not in fact mean the same as when performed by a normal person. Hence Lawrence's implacable insistence on the essential meaninglessness of Sir Clifford Chatterley's life. If at this point I hear mutters of 'Inferiority complex' I can only reply with the old chestnut about the man who was treated for months for this condition-until the psychiatrist discovered that his patient simply was inferior.

The cripple is an object of Christian charity, a socio-medical problem, a stumbling nuisance, and an embarrassment to the girls he falls in love with. He is a vocation for saints, a livelihood for the manufacturers of wheelchairs, a target for busybodies, and a means by which prosperous citizens assuage their consciences. He is at the mercy of overworked doctors and nurses and under-worked bureaucrats and social investigators. He is pitied and ignored, helped and patronized, understood and stared at. But he is hardly ever taken seriously as a man-for reasons I have tried to indicate.

Lawrence saw us clearly. After we have allowed for the eccentric bias of his views, we are forced to admit that he knew our essential irrelevance to the real business of living, and, brutally though he expressed that terrible vision, we should be grateful to him, for he has helped us to see ourselves as we really are. The sight is not a comforting one, but somehow we must find the courage to face it squarely. It is neither masochism nor despair to dwell on our inadequacies, but the first step towards coming to terms with them and with life.

In spite of all I have written, a tiny minority of us will be taken seriously as men. The mightiest nation on earth was ruled for twelve years by a cripple; a legless man became a wartime legend. But for every Roosevelt and Bader there are a thousand Sir Cliffords. The man I am holding up as an example, however, is one I mentioned earlier- Denton Welch. He ruled no one but himself; the only war in which he fought was with himself. But his life was not meaningless; out of his helplessness and pain he created strength and beauty; his entrails nourished the world. Denton Welch never escaped from his sub-world-he did something better. He transcended it.