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The Plumed Serpent

D. H. LAWRENCE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE PLUMED SERPENT

— ◆ —
D. H. Lawrence

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藏书章



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THE PLUMED SERPENT

Introduction

The fascination of *The Plumed Serpent* is indisputable. It cannot be said to be one of D. H. Lawrence's greatest novels, but it is symptomatic of his later work. In it, he indulges in a kind of literary fascism that may be particularly unappealing to women, but men, too, will be aghast at some of the Nietzschean models of intellectual and military supermen. Of all Lawrence's novels, it is the one that his champions find hardest to defend, but it is important both as evidence of Lawrence's literary development and as an indication of the desire among even the most liberal of the period for a new and different political and religious scheme of things.

The plot revolves around the visitor to Mexico, Kate Leslie, an Irish widow of forty. She is horrified by what she considers to be the degeneration and cruelty of modern Mexico, but then she meets the scholar and political leader Don Ramon and the military leader General Cipriano, a pure-bred Indian of raw sexual energy. The aim of these two men is to rid Mexico of Christianity and to revive the old Aztec religion. Don Ramon will represent Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, and Cipriano the god of war Huitzilopochtli. The cult that they represent is characterised by a reawakening of primeval sexuality marked by the dominance of the male over the female, and the leader over the masses. Kate is ambivalent about Cipriano's 'blood consciousness' and his violent sacrifices – her European nature is revolted, but the primitive in her is fascinated by the cult's elemental power. After Cipriano's elevation to the status of man-god, she marries him and submits to his will, acknowledging both his phallic power and the Lawrentian notion that women should not seek sexual satisfaction as an end in itself, but find contentment in a reverent submission to the male.

Although many of Lawrence's preoccupations in *The Plumed Serpent* are plainly silly, it is a book of passion, however misplaced, and of powerful writing. When Lawrence wrote the book in 1923–4 he was in poor health, nursed by his overbearing wife Frieda, and it

is not difficult to trace the connection between the novelist's dependence on Frieda and the wish-fulfilment fantasy of male domination. He was, however, honest enough in the end to write an enigmatic ending, and it is not wholly clear whether Kate accepts her submissive role, or whether she accepts it with considerable reservations. That is for the reader to decide.

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) was one of five children. His father was a miner and his mother an ex-schoolteacher. He attended Nottingham High School for three years, but had to abandon his education temporarily at the age of fifteen to work in a surgical goods factory. Later, however, he won a scholarship to Nottingham University to study for a teacher's certificate and subsequently taught for two years, but serious illness forced him to give up teaching in 1910. *The White Peacock* was published in 1911, *The Trespasser* in 1912, and in 1913 *Sons and Lovers*. In 1912 he eloped with Frieda, the wife of his former professor at Nottingham; she was six years older than Lawrence and had three children. The marriage was a stormy one, and the couple frequently moved from place to place. Their travels supplied much material for Lawrence. Perhaps his most notable books are *The Rainbow* (1915), which was impounded by the police for obscenity, *Women in Love*, finished in 1916 but not published until 1920, *Kangaroo* (1923), *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was published in Florence in 1928. Lawrence died in Vence in the South of France on 2 March 1930.

FURTHER READING

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THE PLUMED SERPENT

CHAPTER I

Beginnings of a Bull-fight

IT WAS THE SUNDAY AFTER EASTER, and the last bull-fight of the season in Mexico City. Four special bulls had been brought over from Spain for the occasion, since Spanish bulls are more fiery than Mexican. Perhaps it is the altitude, perhaps just the spirit of the western Continent which is to blame for the lack of 'pep', as Owen put it, in the native animal.

Although Owen, who was a great socialist, disapproved of bull-fights, 'We have never seen one. We shall have to go,' he said.

'Oh yes, I think we must see it,' said Kate.

'And it's our last chance,' said Owen.

Away he rushed to the place where they sold tickets, to book seats, and Kate went with him. As she came into the street, her heart sank. It was as if some little person inside her were sulking and resisting. Neither she nor Owen spoke much Spanish, there was a fluster at the ticket place, and an unpleasant individual came forward to talk American for them.

It was obvious they ought to buy tickets for the 'Shade'. But they wanted to economise, and Owen said he preferred to sit among the crowd, therefore, against the resistance of the ticket man and the onlookers, they bought reserved seats in the 'Sun'.

The show was on Sunday afternoon. All the tramcars and the frightful little Ford omnibuses called *camions* were labelled *Torero*, and were surging away towards Chapultepec. Kate felt that sudden dark feeling, that she didn't want to go.

'I'm not very keen on going,' she said to Owen.

'Oh, but why not? I don't believe in them on principle, but we've never seen one, so we shall *have* to go.'

Owen was an American, Kate was Irish. 'Never having seen one' meant 'having to go'. But it was American logic rather than Irish, and Kate only let herself be overcome.

Villiers of course was keen. But then he too was American, and he too had never seen one, and being younger, more than anybody he *had* to go.

They got into a Ford taxi and went. The busted car careered

away down the wide dismal street of asphalt and stone and Sunday dreariness. Stone buildings in Mexico have a peculiar hard, dry dreariness.

The taxi drew up in a side street under the big iron scaffolding of the stadium. In the gutters, rather lousy men were selling pulque and sweets, cakes, fruit, and greasy food. Crazy motorcars rushed up and hobbled away. Little soldiers in washed-out cotton uniforms, pinky drab, hung around an entrance. Above all loomed the network iron frame of the huge, ugly stadium.

Kate felt she was going to prison. But Owen excitedly surged to the entrance that corresponded to his ticket. In the depths of him, he too didn't want to go. But he was a born American, and if anything was on show, he had to see it. That was 'Life'.

The man who took the tickets at the entrance, suddenly, as they were passing in, stood in front of Owen, put both his hands on Owen's chest, and pawed down the front of Owen's body. Owen started, bridled, transfixed for a moment. The fellow stood aside. Kate remained petrified.

Then Owen jerked into a smiling composure as the man waved them on. 'Feeling for firearms!' he said, rolling his eyes with pleased excitement at Kate.

But she had not got over the shock of horror, fearing the fellow might paw her.

They emerged out of a tunnel in the hollow of the concrete-and-iron amphitheatre. A real gutter-lout came to look at their counterslips, to see which seats they had booked. He jerked his head downwards, and slouched off. Now Kate knew she was in a trap – a big concrete beetle trap.

They dropped down the concrete steps till they were only three tiers from the bottom. That was their row. They were to sit on the concrete, with a loop of thick iron between each numbered seat. This was a reserved place in the 'Sun'.

Kate sat gingerly between her two iron loops, and looked vaguely around.

'I think it's thrilling!' she said.

Like most modern people, she had a will-to-happiness.

'Isn't it thrilling?' cried Owen, whose will-to-happiness was almost a mania. 'Don't you think so, Bud?'

'Why, yes, I think it may be,' said Villiers, non-committal.

But then Villiers was young, he was only over twenty, while Owen was over forty. The younger generation calculates its 'happiness' in a more businesslike fashion. Villiers was out after a thrill, but he

wasn't going to say he'd got one till he'd got it. Kate and Owen – Kate was also nearly forty – must enthuse a thrill, out of a sort of politeness to the great Showman, Providence.

'Look here!' said Owen. 'Supposing we try to protect our extremity on this concrete – ' and thoughtfully he folded his raincoat and laid it along the concrete ledge so that both he and Kate could sit on it.

They sat and gazed around. They were early. Patches of people mottled the concrete slope opposite, like eruptions. The ring just below was vacant, neatly sanded; and above the ring, on the encircling concrete, great advertisements for hats, with a picture of a city-man's straw hat, and advertisements for spectacles, with pairs of spectacles supinely folded, glared and shouted.

'Where is the "Shade" then?' said Owen, twisting his neck.

At the top of the amphitheatre, near the sky, were concrete boxes. This was the 'Shade', where anybody who was anything sat.

'Oh but,' said Kate, 'I don't want to be perched right up there, so far away.'

'Why no!' said Owen. 'We're much better where we are, in our "Sun", which isn't going to shine a great deal after all.'

The sky was cloudy, preparing for the rainy season.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, and the crowd was filling in, but still only occupied patches of the bare concrete. The lower tiers were reserved, so the bulk of the people sat in the midway levels, and gentry like our trio were more or less isolated.

But the audience was already a mob, mostly of fattish town men in black tight suits and little straw hats, and a mixing-in of the dark-faced labourers in big hats. The men in black suits were probably employees and clerks and factory hands. Some had brought their women, in sky-blue chiffon with brown chiffon hats and faces powdered to look like white marshmallows. Some were families with two or three children.

The fun began. The game was to snatch the hard straw hat off some fellow's head, and send it skimming away down the slope of humanity, where some smart bounder down below would catch it and send it skimming across in another direction. There were shouts of jeering pleasure from the mass, which rose almost to a yell as seven straw hats were skimming, meteor-like, at one moment across the slope of people.

'Look at that!' said Owen. 'Isn't that fun!'

'No,' said Kate, her little *alter ego* speaking out for once, in spite of her will-to-happiness. 'No, I don't like it. I really hate common people.'

As a socialist, Owen disapproved, and as a happy man, he was disconcerted. Because his own real self, as far as he had any left, hated common rowdiness just as much as Kate did.

'It's awfully smart though!' he said, trying to laugh in sympathy with the mob. 'There now, see that!'

'Yes, it's quite smart, but I'm glad it's not my hat,' said Villiers.

'Oh, it's all in the game,' said Owen largely.

But he was uneasy. He was wearing a big straw hat of native make, conspicuous in the comparative isolation of the lower tiers. After a lot of fidgeting, he took off this hat and put it on his knees. But unfortunately he had a very definitely bald spot on a sunburnt head.

Behind, above, sat a dense patch of people in the unreserved section. Already they were throwing things. *Bum!* came an orange, aimed at Owen's bald spot, and hitting him on the shoulder. He glared round rather ineffectually through his big shell spectacles.

'I'd keep my hat on if I were you,' said the cold voice of Villiers.

'Yes, I think perhaps it's wiser,' said Owen, with assumed non-chalance, putting on his hat again.

Whereupon a banana skin rattled on Villiers' tidy and ladylike little panama. He glared round coldly, like a bird that would stab with its beak if it got the chance, but which would fly away at the first real menace.

'How I detest them!' said Kate.

A diversion was created by the entrance, opposite, of the military bands, with their silver and brass instruments under their arms. There were three sets. The chief band climbed and sat on the right, in the big bare tract of concrete reserved for the Authorities. These musicians wore dark grey uniforms trimmed with rose colour, and made Kate feel almost reassured, as if it were Italy and not Mexico City. A silver band in pale buff uniforms sat opposite our party, high up across the hollow distance, and still a third '*música*' threaded away to the left, on the remote scattered hillside of the amphitheatre. The newspapers had said that the President would attend. But the Presidents are scarce at bull-fights in Mexico, nowadays.

There sat the bands, in as much pomp as they could muster, but they did not begin to play. Great crowds now patched the slopes, but there were still bare tracts, especially in the Authorities' section. Only a little distance above Kate's row was a mass of people, as it were impending; a very uncomfortable sensation.

It was three o'clock, and the crowds had a new diversion. The bands, due to strike up at three, still sat there in lordly fashion, sounding not a note.

'*La música! La música!*' shouted the mob, with the voice of mob authority. They were the People, and the revolutions had been their revolutions, and they had won them all. The bands were their bands, present for their amusement.

But the bands were military bands, and it was the army which had won all the revolutions. So the revolutions were *their* revolutions, and they were present for their own glory alone.

Música pagada toca mal tono.

Spasmodically, the insolent yelling of the mob rose and subsided. *La música! La música!* The shout became brutal and violent. Kate always remembered it. *La música!* The band peacocked its non-chalance. The shouting was a great yell: the degenerate mob of Mexico City!

At length, at its own leisure, the bands in grey with dark rose facings struck up: crisp, martial, smart.

'That's fine!' said Owen. 'But that's really good! And it's the first time I've heard a good band in Mexico, a band with any backbone.'

The music was smart, but it was brief. The band seemed scarcely to have started, when the piece was over. The musicians took their instruments from their mouths with a gesture of dismissal. They played just to say they'd played, making it as short as possible.

Música pagada toca mal tono.

There was a ragged interval, then the silver band piped up. And at last it was half-past three, or more.

Whereupon, at some given signal, the masses in the middle, unreserved seats suddenly burst and rushed down on to the lowest, reserved seats. It was a crash like a burst reservoir, and the populace in black Sunday suits poured down round and about our astonished, frightened trio. And in two minutes it was over. Without any pushing or shoving. Everybody careful, as far as possible, not to touch anybody else. You don't elbow your neighbour if he's got a pistol on his hip and a knife at his belly. So all the seats in the lower tiers filled in one rush, like the flowing of water.

Kate now sat among the crowd. But her seat, fortunately, was above one of the track-ways that went round the arena, so at least she would not have anybody sitting between her knees.

Men went uneasily back and forth along this gangway past the feet, wanting to get in next to their friends, but never venturing to ask. Three seats away, on the same row, sat a Polish bolshevist fellow who had met Owen. He leaned over and asked the Mexican next to Owen if he might change seats with him. 'No,' said the Mexican. 'I'll sit in my own seat.'

'Muy bien, Señor, muy bien.' said the Pole.

The show did not begin, and men like lost mongrels still prowled back and forth on the track that was the next step down from Kate's feet. They began to take advantage of the ledge on which rested the feet of our party, to squat there.

Down sat a heavy fellow, plumb between Owen's knees.

'I hope they won't sit on *my* feet,' said Kate anxiously.

'We won't let them,' said Villiers, with birdlike decision. 'Why don't you shove him off, Owen? Shove him off?'

And Villiers glared at the Mexican fellow ensconced between Owen's legs. Owen flushed, and laughed uncomfortably. He was not good at shoving people off. The Mexican began to look round at the three angry white people.

And in another moment, another fat Mexican in a black suit and a little black hat was lowering himself into Villiers' foot-space. But Villiers was too quick for him. He quickly brought his feet together under the man's sinking posterior, so the individual subsided uncomfortably on to a pair of boots, and at the same time felt a hand shoving him quietly but determinedly on the shoulder.

'No!' Villiers was saying in good American. 'This place is for *my feet*! Get off! You get off!'

And he continued, quietly but very emphatically, to push the Mexican's shoulder, to remove him.

The Mexican half raised himself, and looked round murderously at Villiers. Physical violence was being offered, and the only retort was death. But the young American's face was so cold and abstract, only the eyes showing a primitive, birdlike fire, that the Mexican was nonplussed. And Kate's eyes were blazing with Irish contempt.

The fellow struggled with his Mexican city-bred inferiority complex. He muttered an explanation in Spanish that he was only sitting there for a moment, till he could join his friends waving a hand towards a lower tier. Villiers did not understand a word, but he reiterated: 'I don't care what it is. This place is for *my feet*, and you don't sit there.'

Oh, home of liberty! Oh, land of the free! Which of these two men was to win in the struggle for conflicting liberty? Was the fat fellow free to sit between Villiers' feet, or was Villiers free to keep his foot-space?

There are all sorts of inferiority complex, and the city Mexican has a very strong sort, that makes him all the more aggressive, once it is roused. Therefore the intruder lowered his posterior with a heavy, sudden bounce on Villiers' feet, and Villiers, out of very distaste, had

had to extricate his feet from such a compression. The young man's face went white at the nostrils, and his eyes took on that bright abstract look of pure democratic anger. He pushed the fat shoulders more decisively, repeating: 'Go away! Go away! You're not to sit there.'

The Mexican, on his own ground, and heavy on his own base, let himself be shoved, oblivious.

'Insolence!' said Kate loudly. 'Insolence!'

She glared at the fat back in the shoddily-fitting black coat, which looked as if a woman dressmaker had made it, with loathing. How could any man's coat-collar look so home-made, so *en famille*!

Villiers remained with a fixed, abstract look on his thin face, rather like a death's head. All his American will was summoned up, the bald eagle of the north bristling in every feather. The fellow *should not* sit there. — But how to remove him?

The young man sat tense with will to annihilaté his beetle-like intruder, and Kate used all her Irish malice to help him.

'Don't you wonder who was his tailor?' she asked, with a flicker in her voice.

Villiers looked at the femalish black coat of the Mexican, and made an arch grimace at Kate.

'I should say he hadn't one. Perhaps did it himself.'

'Very likely!' Kate laughed venomously.

It was too much. The man got up and betook himself, rather diminished, to another spot.

'Triumph!' said Kate. 'Can't you do the same, Owen?'

Owen laughed uncomfortably, glancing down at the man between his knees as he might glance at a dog with rabies, when it had its back to him.

'Apparently not yet, unfortunately,' he said, with some constraint, turning his nose away again from the Mexican, who was using him as a sort of chair-back.

There was an exclamation. Two horsemen in gay uniforms and bearing long staffs had suddenly ridden into the ring. They went round the arena, then took up their posts, sentry-wise, on either side the tunnel entrance through which they had come in.

In marched a little column of four toreadors wearing tight uniforms plastered with silver embroidery. They divided, and marched smartly in opposite directions, two and two, around the ring, till they came to the place facing the section of the Authorities, where they made their salute.

So this was a bull-fight! Kate already felt a chill of disgust.

In the seats of the Authorities were very few people, and certainly no sparkling ladies in high tortoiseshell combs and lace mantillas. A few common-looking people, bourgeois with not much taste, and a couple of officers in uniform. The President had not come.

There was no glamour, no charm. A few commonplace people in an expanse of concrete were the elect, and below, four grotesque and effeminate-looking fellows in tight, ornate clothes were the heroes. With their rather fat posteriors and their squiffs of pigtailed and their clean-shaven faces, they looked like eunuchs, or women in tight pants, these precious toreadors.

The last of Kate's illusions concerning bull-fights came down with a flop. These were the darlings of the mob! These were the gallant toreadors! Gallant? Just about as gallant as assistants in a butcher's shop. Lady-killers? Ugh!

There was an Ah! of satisfaction from the mob. Into the ring suddenly rushed a smallish, dun-coloured bull with long flourishing horns. He ran out, blindly, as if from the dark, probably thinking that now he was free. Then he stopped short, seeing he was not free, but surrounded in an unknown way. He was utterly at a loss.

A toreador came forward and switched out a pink cloak like a fan not far from the bull's nose. The bull gave a playful little prance, neat and pretty, and charged mildly on the cloak. The toreador switched the cloak over the animal's head, and the neat little bull trotted on round the ring, looking for a way to get out.

Seeing the wooden barrier around the arena, finding he was able to look over it, he thought he might as well take the leap. So over he went into the corridor or passageways which circled the ring, and in which stood the servants of the arena.

Just as nimbly, these servants vaulted over the barrier into the arena, that was now bull-less.

The bull in the gangway trotted enquiringly round till he came to an opening on to the arena again. So back he trotted into the ring.

And back into the gangway vaulted the servants, where they stood again to look on.

The bull trotted waveringly and somewhat irritated. The toreadors waved their cloaks at him, and he swerved on. Till his vague course took him to where one of the horsemen with lances sat motionless on his horse.

Instantly, in a pang of alarm, Kate noticed that the horse was thickly blindfolded with a black cloth. Yes, and so was the horse on which sat the other picador.

The bull trotted suspiciously up to the motionless horse bearing