

# THE HOTEL

*Anne Wyndham Lewis*

OUR ENFORCED STAY in Canada was brought about by newly imposed war regulations which prohibited women from travelling to England and also prohibited the transfer of money to Canada. Fortunately, we found sympathetic friends in Canada, among whom were the late J. S. McLean, President of Canada Packers, who commissioned portraits, and A. Y. Jackson, the Canadian painter, whose generous friendship and help were given with unaffected simplicity.

On arriving in Toronto, we booked into "the Hotel", a replica of a small English manor house in which, without doubt, our most notable experiences in Canada were enacted. At the beginning of our stay, it was a sedate and quiet hotel, but gradually — as the war continued — the atmosphere changed into that of rambustious turmoil. In these circumstances a kind of community spirit emerged, and both guests and staff became increasingly interested in us and aware of our invidious position, until we were accepted as a rather strange but understandable addition to this slowly congealing wartime community. Conspicuous in this group of harmonious though heterogenous characters was Affie, the manageress who, with apparent foresight, never failed to visit us and to cheer us with her gossip whenever difficulties threatened to overwhelm us.

As the war increased in violence, so this group of human beings became noticeably more anarchistic, resisting the intrusion of outside events, until finally it seemed to be divorced from the warring world outside. Only once, in the earlier part of our stay, did we hear any reference to the war, and that was from Affie. Even the war casualties in my own immediate family were not discussed, and the natural feelings one had towards them seemed to be stifled instantly in this warm human cocoon. The sense of nationality decreased, and a quality of Universalism came into being.

(The only other time I ever experienced this quality of human universalism, "community-spirit", was in a hotel in Agadir, the last outpost of the French administration on the edge of the "dissident" Sahara. The hotel patio after dinner was the general meeting-place, where Legionnaires, army personnel, journalists, gun-runners, the hotel proprietor and a few guests gathered together, the conversation interrupted only by anonymous obese insects cannonading into the dim lights. Probably it was this experience which gave birth to the idea that had the whole Hotel in Toronto been magically moved, lock, stock and barrel, and dumped down there, no-one would have noticed any difference.)

The pattern came to its natural end one winter morning when our breakfast serenity was shattered by muffled shouting and the heaving tramp of feet. On investigation, we saw a fireman rushing down the passage banging on doors and shouting, "Fire! All out!" Incredulous, we returned to our breakfast, but were interrupted by a resounding knock, followed by a fireman's face poking through the open door and saying sternly, "Fire! All out!"

A general exodus was in progress. From the front of the premises, where the fire was the most fierce, firemen helped the stragglers to grope their way through the dense smoke. Many were clad only in pyjamas and dressing-gowns, poor protection against the exereame cold. Some lost all their possessions and were left penniless; their spirits were at the lowest ebb.

It was a striking scene, the contrast of frozen snow emphasizing the black billowing clouds of smoke which were penetrated intermittently by long sullen-red beams that rapidly disappeared and reappeared only to die, darting again into sight and exploding with firework zest into crackling cascades of sparks. A party atmosphere began to hang over the scene as people from neighbouring houses teamed together to revive the chilled and tired firemen with continuous cups of tea. Other people were bustling among the forlorn guests, offering them temporary shelter. At the end of the day, the fire at last extinguished, the firemen gone, the Hotel lay deserted and in darkness.

A few days later, in our temporary lodgings, we received a message from the Hotel that Affie had died from the effects of the fire; we were invited to the funeral service. So the only casualty of the fire was this possessor of remarkable foresight or sensitivity, who had always been on the spot to comfort with gay nonsense without ever once hinting that she knew of our troubles and our need for distraction. It was a subdued gathering at the funeral, and we dispersed silently at the end of the service. It was our farewell to this warm and kind group of people. As a fitting goodbye to Affie, there is this quotation from *Self Condemned*.

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It was a sinister, upside-down forest of ice, rooted in the air; . . . but René saw it as a funeral vault for Affie, which would be mysterious and inviolable for long enough to suit her volatile taste. Her hooting cry could sound there in the night — the only human sound that could be heard . . . and only Affie [could] be at home in this unearthly scenery.

The Hotel became the mainspring of *Self Condemned*, serving to confirm the ideas — universalism and opposition to war and to the continuing injustices caused by the “Establishment” methods which have penetrated so many countries — that Wyndham Lewis held for so long. Fundamentally, *Self Condemned* is a “protest” book.

After the fire we departed for Windsor, Ontario, where my husband had contracted to give a series of lectures arranged by Father Stanley Murphy at Assumption College. When we were finally settled in an apartment, Father Murphy came to visit us with two companions, the late Professor Giovanelli, and Professor Marshall McLuhan. With a youthful enthusiasm, they set to work to promote lectures and portrait commissions in St. Louis, Missouri, and they were surprisingly successful, so that eventually we found ourselves in St. Louis under their enjoyable tutelage.

Yet at the end of our stay in Canada the main original purpose of our visit remained incompletely fulfilled; this had been to carry out research into the lives of Wyndham Lewis’s grandparents in Canada, and to go back to his birthplace in Nova Scotia.