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THE LOST GIRL

D. H. LAWRENCE

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INTRODUCTION

BY RICHARD ALDINGTON

The Lost Girl was first published in England in 1920; in September according to Lawrence's publisher, in November according to his bibliographer. Yet it had been started eight years earlier, and the first draft of an indeterminate portion of the book was written in 1912–13, along with the first draft of *The Rainbow*. It was of course entirely re-written in 1920.

This is what happened. At the end of August 1912 Lawrence and his wife Frieda (with a total of £23, and no more, between them) set out on foot, accompanied by David Garnett for part of the way, for Lake Garda, in Italy. There they settled down for six months in part of a house in Gargnano. In those days Lawrence was so poor that he could not afford even a sixpenny reprint, and went for months without reading 'a word of English print'. He was therefore deeply grateful to his former school colleague, A. W. McLeod, for sending him the new book which was all the rage at that time.

The book was Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns*, and reading it in that isolation had a powerful effect on Lawrence. (Whatever he read, he read with intense concentration, and seldom forgot.) Bennett abruptly brought him from the lemon-groves of Garda to the smoke and noise and over-crowding of the industrial Midlands, where the characters talked 'almost my own dialect'. Lawrence hated the book's 'hopelessness' and Bennett's 'resignation'. He thought the industrial Midlands need not be 'old and grubby and despairing' and that 'tragedy ought really to be a great kick at misery'. After all, 'what does it matter if one is poor, and risks one's livelihood, and reputation? One *can* have the necessary things, life, and love, and clean warmth.'

Lawrence did not want to be poor, though he could always make the best of poverty. It was natural, then, that as he brooded over England's best-seller of 1912, he should wonder why he with his gifts as a writer and even closer to the bone knowledge of industrial England than Bennett, should not also write a best-seller of realism. His memory of early days gave him the character of James Houghton. According to Stuart Gelder, his name in real life was George Cullen, 'a remarkable man' who opened in Eastwood (Lawrence's native town) a woman's shop stocked with beautiful textiles far above the tastes of the miners' wives. He speculated in a small coal-mine and one of the early cinemas, and came to grief. But the daughter Alvina, who is the 'lost girl' and the real theme of the book, is drawn from quite other experience and transfigured by Lawrence's imagination.

The first draft of *The Lost Girl* was begun in November 1912 and was apparently called *Scargill Street* – Lawrence was not good at titles. How far this MS. went cannot be known, for all trace of it as well as the MS. of the final book is lost. Lawrence became so much absorbed in 'The Rainbow' that he dropped the other novel, and left it with his wife's relations in Germany. There it remained from 1914 to 1919, in spite of Lawrence's efforts to have it sent to him through neutral Switzerland.

In January 1920 the Lawrences were in Capri, and his letters more than once refer to an old MS. which was on its way to him from Germany and was held up by the Italian strikes. He then thought of re-naming it *A Mixed Marriage*. As soon as he saw the script he saw it would have to be re-created – since 1912 everything had changed. The re-writing was done at high speed in the early spring of 1920 in an old Sicilian farm-house near Taormina which the Lawrences rented during 1920–22. The date of starting is not known, but an entry in his recently-discovered diary jottings proves that it was finished on the 5th May 1920.

Had Lawrence originally intended to take his 'lost girl' from industrial England to Italy? Given the circumstances of the book's original conception, it looks almost certain,

for what he was brooding over was the problem of why the *people* of rich England should be so life-starved, and the *people* of poor Italy should seem so contented – 'they're *glad* to have children even if they're poor', he had reported in astonishment. But the flight of Alvina and Cicio to Italy is very different in 'The Lost Girl' as we have it from what it would have been if completed in 1913.

Of course the situation between Alvina and Cicio is one which occurs constantly in Lawrence's fiction – the girl marrying a man of a much lower social status, against the advice of friends, and finding immense compensation in his superior warmth and understanding. It was Lawrence's own situation *vis-à-vis* his aristocratic wife. *The Lost Girl* is a projection of this situation beyond himself, but suddenly in Chapter XIII, 'The Wedded Wife', the experiences of Alvina and Cicio become those of Lawrence and Frieda in December 1919. The tone and emotion of the book rise abruptly to a much higher level, we lose all Alvina's old friends and acquaintances, including those exasperatingly foolish Natcha-Kee-Tawaras, and the book concentrates on Cicio and Alvina, chiefly on Alvina, who suffers and feels and delights as Lawrence did.

Cicio sometimes fails to win the sympathy of English-speaking readers, but it is a very clever interpretation of Italian character. As a working-man Lawrence had a sympathetic understanding with the virtues of the Italian working-classes under whose faults lie such warmth, such industry, and such simple love of life.

'It was early in November before they could leave for Italy' says *The Lost Girl*, and it was in November 1919 that Lawrence left England, self-exiled and in grief. During the war, through some bureaucratic mix-up, he had been expelled from Cornwall under suspicion of espionage – to his heart-broken indignation. So when Alvina on the channel boat looks back to the 'ash-grey, corpse-grey cliffs' and sees her country for the last time as 'a long ash-grey coffin slowly submerging', the heart which broke in outraged love and repudiation was Lawrence's. He, 'the most English little man

that ever breathed', accused by his own people of espionage. He never could forgive it. Why should he? 'The fools!'

All 'The Journey Across' and the experiences at Pancrazio were Lawrence's. Pancrazio is Picinisco, in the wild mountains behind Caserta, which the Lawrences found so primitive, so 'icy-mountainous' that with the menace to his always threatened lungs, they fled south to Capri, that 'stew-pot of semi-literary cats'. But Capri and Lawrence's life there make another story. Alvina is left, none too hopefully I always feel, in 'icy-mountainous' Pancrazio, with Cicio leaving for the war; and even the flowers which gave her such 'passionate nostalgia' were not of the Abruzzi but from the slopes of Etna. Not Alvina but Lawrence, bending in love over the 'rose-coloured wild gladioli' and 'small irises, black-purple and yellow blotched with brown, like a wasp', felt that 'the flowers ... uttered the earth in magical expression', cast a spell, bewitched him and stole his own soul away from him.

CHAPTER I

The Decline of Manchester House

TAKE a mining townlet like Woodhouse, with a population of ten thousand people, and three generations behind it. This space of three generations argues a certain well-established society. The old 'County' has fled from the sight of so much disembowelled coal, to flourish on mineral rights in regions still idyllic. Remains one great and inaccessible magnate, the local coal owner: three generations old, and clambering on the bottom step of the 'County', kicking off the mass below. Rule him out.

A well established society in Woodhouse, full of fine shades, ranging from the dark of coal-dust to grit of stone-mason and sawdust of timber-merchant, through the lustre of lard and butter and meat, to the perfume of the chemist and the disinfectant of the doctor, on to the serene gold-tarnish of bank-managers, cashiers for the firm, clergymen and such-like, as far as the automobile refulgence of the general-manager of all the collieries. Here the *ne plus ultra.* The general manager lives in the shrubberied seclusion of the so-called Manor. The genuine Hall, abandoned by the 'County', has been taken over as offices by the firm.

Here we are then: a vast substratum of colliers; a thick sprinkling of tradespeople intermingled with small employers of labour and diversified by elementary schoolmasters and nonconformist clergy; a higher layer of bank-managers, rich millers and well-to-do ironmasters, episcopal clergy and the managers of collieries: then the rich and sticky cherry of the local coal-owner glistening over all.

Such the complicated social system of a small industrial town in the Midlands of England, in this year of grace 1920. But let us go back a little. Such it was in the last calm year of plenty, 1913.

A calm year of plenty. But one chronic and dreary malady: that of the odd women. Why, in the name of all prosperity,

should every class but the lowest in such a society hang overburdened with Dead Sea fruit of odd women, unmarried, unmarriageable women, called old maids? Why it is that every tradesman, every schoolmaster, every bank-manager, and every clergyman produces one, two, three, or more old maids. Do the middle-classes, particularly the lower middle-classes, give birth to more girls than boys? Or do the lower middle class men assiduously climb up or down, in marriage, thus leaving their true partners stranded? Or are middle-class women very squeamish in their choice of husbands?

However it be, it is a tragedy. Or perhaps it is not.

Perhaps these unmarried women of the middle-classes are the famous sexless-workers of our ant-industrial society, of which we hear so much. Perhaps all they lack is an occupation: in short, a job. But perhaps we might hear their own opinion, before we lay the law down.

In Woodhouse, there was a terrible crop of old maids among the 'nobs', the tradespeople, and the clergy. The whole town of women, colliers' wives and all, held its breath as it saw a chance of one of these daughters of comfort and woe getting off. They flocked to the well-to-do weddings with an intoxication of relief. For let class-jealousy be what it may, a woman hates to see another woman left stately on the shelf, without a chance. They all *wanted* the middle-class girls to find husbands. Everyone wanted it, including the girls themselves. Hence the dismalness.

Now James Houghton had only one child: his daughter Alvina. Surely Alvina Houghton –

But let us retreat to the early eighties, when Alvina was a baby: or even further back, to the palmy days of James Houghton. In his palmy days, James Houghton was *crême de la crême* of Woodhouse society. The house of Houghton had always been well-to-do: tradespeople, we must admit; but after a few generations of affluence, tradespeople acquire a distinct *cachet*. Now James Houghton, at the age of twenty-eight, inherited a splendid business in Manchester goods, in Woodhouse. He was a tall, thin elegant young man with side-whiskers, genuinely refined, somewhat in the Bulwer style.

He had a taste for elegant conversation and elegant literature and elegant Christianity: a tall, thin, brittle young man, rather fluttering in his manner, full of facile ideas, and with a beautiful speaking voice: most beautiful. Withal, of course, a tradesman. He courted a small, dark woman, older than himself, daughter of a Derbyshire squire. He expected to get at least ten thousand pounds with her. In which he was disappointed, for he got only eight hundred. Being of a romantic-commercial nature, he never forgave her, but always treated her with the most elegant courtesy. To see him peel and prepare an apple for her was an exquisite sight. But that peeled and quartered apple was her portion. This elegant Adam of commerce gave Eve her own back, nicely cored, and had no more to do with her. Meanwhile Alvina was born.

Before all this, however, before his marriage, James Houghton had built Manchester House. It was a vast square building – vast, that is, for Woodhouse – standing on the main street and highroad of the small but growing town. The lower front consisted of two fine shops, one for Manchester goods, one for silk and woollens. This was James Houghton's commercial poem.

For James Houghton was a dreamer, and something of a poet: commercial, be it understood. He liked the novels of George Macdonald, and the fantasies of that author, extremely. He wove one continual fantasy for himself, a fantasy of commerce. He dreamed of silks and poplins, luscious in texture and of unforeseen exquisiteness: he dreamed of carriages of the 'County' arrested before his windows, of exquisite women ruffling charmed, entranced, to his counter. And charming, entrancing, he served them his lovely fabrics, which only he and they could sufficiently appreciate. His fame spread, until Alexandra, Princess of Wales, and Elizabeth, Empress of Austria, the two best-dressed women in Europe, floated down from heaven to the shop in Woodhouse, and sallied forth to show what could be done by purchasing from James Houghton.

We cannot say why James Houghton failed to become the Liberty or the Snelgrove of his day. Perhaps he had too

much imagination. Be that as it may, in those early days when he brought his wife to her new home, his window on the Manchester side was a foam and a mayblossom of muslins and prints, his window on the London side was an autumn evening of silks and rich fabrics. What could fail to be dazzled! But she, poor darling, from her stone hall in stony Derbyshire, was a little bit repulsed by the man's dancing in front of his stock, like David before the ark.

The home to which he brought her was a monument. In the great bedroom over the shop he had had his furniture *built:* built of solid mahogany: oh too, too solid. No doubt he hopped or skipped himself with satisfaction into the monstrous matrimonial bed: it could only be mounted by means of a stool and chair. But the poor, secluded little woman, older than he, must have climbed up with a heavy heart, to lie and face the gloomy Bastille of Mahogany, the great cupboard opposite, or to turn wearily sideways to the great cheval mirror, which performed a perpetual and hideous bow before her grace. Such furniture! It could never be removed from the room.

The little child was born in the second year. And then James Houghton decamped to a small, half-furnished bedroom at the other end of the house, where he slept on a rough board and played the anchorite for the rest of his days. His wife was left alone with her baby and the built-in furniture. She developed heart disease, as a result of nervous repressions.

But like a butterfly James fluttered over his fabrics. He was a tyrant to his shop-girls. No French marquis in a Dickens novel could have been more elegant and *raffiné* and heartless. The girls detested him. And yet, his curious refinement and enthusiasm bore them away. They submitted to him. The shop attracted much curiosity. But the poor-spirited Woodhouse people were weak buyers. They wearied James Houghton with their demand for common zephyrs, for red flannel which they would scallop with black worsted, for black alpacas and bombazines and merinos. He fluffed out his silk-striped muslins, his India cotton-prints. But the

natives shied off as he had offered them the poisoned robes of Herakles.

There was a sale. These sales contributed a good deal to Mrs Houghton's nervous heart-disease. They brought the first signs of wear and tear into the face of James Houghton. At first, of course, he merely marked down, with discretion, his less-expensive stock of prints and muslins, nuns-veilings and muslin delaines, with a few fancy braidings and trimmings in guimp or bronze to enliven the affair. And Woodhouse bought cautiously.

After the sale, however, James Houghton felt himself at liberty to plunge into an orgy of new stock. He flitted, with a tense look on his face, to Manchester. After which huge bundles, bales, and boxes arrived in Woodhouse, and were dumped on the pavement of the shop. Friday evening came, and with it a revelation in Houghton's window: the first piqués, the first strangely-woven and honeycombed toilet covers and bed quilts, the first frill-caps and aprons for maid-servants: a wonder in white. That was how James advertised it. 'A Wonder in White'. Who knows but that he had been reading Wilkie Collins' famous novel!

As the nine days of the wonder-in-white passed and receded, James disappeared in the direction of London. A few Fridays later he came out with his Winter Touch. Weird and wonderful winter coats, for ladies – everything James handled was for ladies, he scorned the coarser sex –: weird and wonderful winter coats for ladies, of thick, black, pock-marked cloth, stood and flourished their bear-fur cuffs in the background, while tippets, boas, muffs, and winter-fancies coquetted in front of the window-space. Friday-night crowds gathered outside: the gas-lamps shone their brightest: James Houghton hovered in the background like an author on his first night in the theatre. The result was a sensation. Ten villages stared and crushed round the plate glass. It was a sensation: but what sensation! In the breasts of the crowd, wonder, admiration, *fear*, and ridicule. Let us stress the word fear. The inhabitants of Woodhouse were afraid lest James Houghton should impose his standards upon them. His goods

were in excellent taste: but his customers were in as bad taste as possible. They stood outside and pointed, giggled, and jeered. Poor James, like an author on his first night, saw his work fall more than flat.

But still, he believed in his own excellence: and quite justly. What he failed to perceive was that the crowd hated excellence. Woodhouse wanted a gently graduated progress in mediocrity, a mediocrity so stale and flat that it fell outside the imagination of any sensitive mortal. Woodhouse wanted a series of vulgar little thrills, as one tawdry mediocrity was imported from Nottingham or Birmingham to take the place of some tawdry mediocrity which Nottingham and Birmingham had already discarded. That Woodhouse, as a very condition of its own being, hated any approach to originality or real taste, this James Houghton could never learn. He thought he had not been clever enough, when he had been far, far too clever already. He always thought that Dame Fortune was a capricious and fastidious dame, a sort of Elizabeth of Austria or Alexandra, Princess of Wales, elegant beyond his grasp. Whereas Dame Fortune, even in London or Vienna, let alone in Woodhouse, was a vulgar woman of the middle and lower middle-class, ready to put her heavy foot on anything that was not vulgar, machine-made, and appropriate to the herd. When he saw his delicate originalities, as well as his faint flourishes of draper's fantasy, squashed flat under the calm and solid foot of vulgar Dame Fortune, he fell into fits of depression bordering on mysticism, and talked to his wife in a vague way of higher influences and the angel Israfel. She, poor lady, was thoroughly scared by Israfel, and completely unhooked by the vagaries of James.

At last – we hurry down the slope of James' misfortunes – the real days of Houghton's Great Sales began. Houghton's Great Bargain Events were really events. After some years of hanging on, he let go splendidly. He marked down his prints, his chintzes, his dimities, and his veilings with a grand and lavish hand. Bang went his blue pencil through 3/11, and nobly he subscribed 1/0¾. Prices fell like nuts. A lofty one-and-eleven rolled down to six-three, 1/6 magically shrunk into 4¾d.,