

Goose Fair

By D. H. Lawrence

I

THROUGH the gloom of evening, through the flaring torches of the night before the fair, through the still fogs of the succeeding dawn came paddling the weary geese, lifting their poor feet that had been dipped in tar for shoon and trailing them along the cobble-stones into the town. Last of all, in the afternoon, a country girl drove in her dozen birds, disconsolate because she was so late. She was a heavily built girl, fair, with regular features, and yet unprepossessing. She needed chiselling down, her contours were brutal. Perhaps it was weariness that hung her eyelids a little lower than was pleasant to see. When she spoke to her clumsily lagging birds it was in a snarling nasal tone, very disagreeable. One of the silly things sat down in the gutter and refused to move. It looked very ridiculous, but also rather pitiful, squat there with its head up, refusing to be urged on by the ungentle toe of the girl. The latter swore fiercely, then picked up the great complaining bird, and looking round to see if any one had heard her, drove on the lamentable eleven.

No one had heard her. The women were not sitting chatting on their doorsteps, seaming up the cotton hose, or swiftly passing through their fingers the piled white lace, and in the high dark houses the song of the hosiery frames was hushed: "Shackety-boom, Shackety-shackety-boom Z—zzz!" As she dragged up Hollow Stone, people returning from the fair chaffed her and asked her what o'clock it was. She did not reply, but her look was dangerous. The Lace Market was quiet as the Sabbath: even the great brass plates on the doors were dull with neglect. There seemed an afternoon atmosphere of raw discontent. The girl stopped a moment before the dismal prospect of one of the great warehouses that had been gutted with fire. She looked at the lean threatening walls, and watched her white flock waddling in reckless misery below, and she would have laughed out loud had the wall fallen flat upon

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them and relieved her of them. But the wall did not fall, so she crossed the road, and walking on the safe side, hurried after her charge. Her look was even more sullen. She remembered the state of trade—Trade, the invidious enemy; Trade which thrust out its hand and shut the factory doors, and pulled the stockings off their seats, and left the web half-finished on the frame; Trade, which mysteriously choked up the mysterious sources of the rivulets of wealth, and blacker and more secret than a pestilence, starved the town. Through this morose atmosphere of bad trade, in the afternoon of the first day of the fair, the girl strode down to the Poultry with eleven sound geese and one lame one to sell.

The idiotic little Frenchmen were at the bottom of it! So everybody said, but nobody quite knew how. At any rate, they had gone to war with the Prussians and got beaten, as they deserved, the mountebanks, ruining trade!

A little fog rose up, and the twilight gathered around. Then they flared abroad their torches in the fair, insulting the night. The girl still sat in the Poultry, and her weary geese unsold on the cold stones, illuminated by the hissing lamp of a man who sold rabbits and pigeons and such-like assorted livestock.

II

In another part of the town, near Sneinton Church, another girl came to the door to look at the night. She was tall and slender, dressed with the severe accuracy which marks the girl of superior culture. Her hair was arranged with simplicity about the long, pale, cleanly-cut face. She leaned forward very slightly to glance down the street, listening. She very carefully preserved the appearance of having come quite casually to the door, yet she lingered and lingered and stood very still to listen when she heard a footstep, but when it proved to be only a common man, she drew herself up proudly and looked with a small smile over his head. He hesitated to glance into the open hall, lighted so splendidly with a scarlet-shaded lamp, and at the slim girl in brown silk lifted up to advantage before the light. But she, she looked over his head. He passed on.

Presently she started and hung in suspense. Somebody was crossing the road. She ran down the steps in a pretty agitation, not effuse, saying in quick but accurately articulated words: "Will! I began to think you'd gone to the fair. Listen! you can hear it so far—what do they find to enjoy in that commotion! I'm glad you've come to dinner," she

shrugged her shoulders slightly, "the place is as dreary as an empty church, and the bray of the fair makes one more disconsolate. But do come in."

The man, who had a short face and who spoke with his lip curling up on one side, and who had a drawling speech with ironically exaggerated intonation, replied :

"I'm awfully sorry, I am, straight, Lois. It's an infernal shame. I've got to go round to the biz. Man proposes—else woman—and it's generally the devil disposes." He turned aside with irony to smile to himself in the darkness, and add "else man."

"But surely, Will!" remonstrated the girl, keenly disappointed.

"Fact, Lois!—and I do feel wild. But I've got to go down to the works. They may be getting a bit warm down there, you know"—he jerked his head in the direction of the fair—"and if the Lambs get frisky!—well, you know they're a bit off about the work, and there have been fires lately—"

"Will, you don't think——!" exclaimed the girl, laying her hand on his arm in the true-fashion of romance, and looking up at him earnestly.

"Dad's had rumours," he replied, looking down at her with gravity. They remained in this suspended attitude for a moment, then he said :

"I've a good mind not to go, Lois. I'll stop with you."

"No, Will!" She drew herself erect, and spoke with decision. "No, Will, you must go."

"What a shame!" he murmured, taking her in his arms and kissing her.

She let him keep her for a moment, then she kissed him in return and disengaged him, saying, with the air of a woman who sends her lover to duty and to death, "Go now."

"Good night!" he said, tearing himself away. "Good night!" He hurried down the street. She listened to his footsteps echoing away, then stilling her sighs, and composing herself, she turned indoors.

"Helloa!" said her father, glancing over his paper as she entered the dining-room. "What's up, miss?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied, in her crisp, calm tones. "Will won't be here to dinner to-night."

"Not likely, fair night."

"Oh! the fair makes no difference."

"Oh! Where is he frying his fish, then?"

Lois looked at her father sternly, and answered :

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"He's gone down to watch at the factory. There is a rumour of incendiary."

Her father quickly put up the newspaper before his face.

III

Lois retired very early. She had a fire in her bedroom. She drew the curtains and stood holding aside a heavy fold, looking out at the night. She could see only the nothingness of the fog: not even the glare of the fair was evident, though the noise clamoured small in the distance. In front of everything she could see her own faint image. She crossed to the dressing-table, and there leaned her face to the mirror, and looked at herself. She looked a long time, then very sadly she rose, changed her dress for a dressing-jacket, and took up "Sesame and Lilies."

Late in the night she was roused from sleep by a bustle in the house. She sat up and heard a hurrying to and fro and the sound of anxious voices. She put on her dressing-gown and went out to her mother's room. Seeing her at the head of the stairs, she said in her quick, clean voice:

"Mother, what is it?"

"Oh, child, don't ask me! Go to bed, dear, do! I shall surely be worried out of my life."

"Mother, what is it?" Lois was sharp and emphatic.

"I hope your father won't go. Now I do hope your father won't go. He's got a cold as it is."

"Mother, tell me what it is." Lois imperiously took her mother's arm.

"It's Selby's. I should have thought you would have heard the fire-engine, and Jack isn't in yet. I hope we're safe!" Lois returned to her bedroom and dressed. She coiled her plaited hair, and having put on a cloak, slipped out of the house. To say she slipped out of the house is to insult her. She left the house.

She hurried along under the fog-dripping trees towards the meaner part of the town. When she got near, she saw a glare in the fog, and closed her lips tight. She hastened on till she was in the crowd. With dreadful, peaked, despairing face she watched the fire. Then she looked a little wildly over the fire-reddened faces in the crowd, and catching sight of her father hurried to him.

"Oh, dadda—is he safe? Tell me he's safe."

"Safe, ay, he's safe enough. You've no business here.

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Here, here's Sampson, he'll take you home. I've enough to think about; there's my own place to watch. Him safe! he's safe, you may bet your life on that."

"Why do you speak like that, dadda?" she asked coldly.

"Go home—Sampson, just take Miss Lois home—now! Run along child!"

"You don't for one moment suspect that he—he—Father!"

"Go on, child, go on. Your mother will be having heart attacks and what not. Do go, little woman."

The tears sprang to Lois' eyes. She looked at the fire and the tears were quickly dried by the heat. The flames roared and struggled upward. The great wonder of the fire made her forget even her indignant grief at the suspicions which her father had thrown on her lover. There was a crashing and bursting of timber, as the first floor fell in a mass into the great blazing gulf, splashing the fire in all directions, to the terror of the crowd. She saw the steel of the machines growing white hot and twisting like flaming letters in a dreadful message. Piece after piece of the flooring gave way, and the machines dropped in red ruin as the wooden framework burned away. The air became unbreathable; the fog was swallowed up; sparks went rushing up as if they would burn the dark heavens; sometimes cards of lace went whirling into the gulf of the sky, waving with wings of fire. It was dangerous to stand near this great cup of roaring destruction.

Sampson, the grey old manager of Suxton and Co's, led her away as soon as she would turn her face to listen to him. He was a stout, irritable man. He elbowed his way roughly through the crowd, and Lois followed him, her head high, her lips closed proudly. He led her for some distance without speaking, then at last, unable to contain his garrulous irritability, he broke out:

"What do they expect? What can they expect? They can't expect to stand a bad time. They spring up like mushrooms as big as a house side, but there's no stability in 'em. I remember William Selby when he'd run on my errands. Yes, there's some as can make much out of little, and there's some as can make much out of nothing, but they find their mistake out. There's no need to hurry, Miss Lois—I'm not as young as I was. I can remember the time when you'd hang on my finger and run when I walked slow. But things are altered, things are altered. But I shouldn't like to come to such a pass as William Selby. I shouldn't indeed. No, indeed, a fire's the last thing I should hope to come to—the very last!"

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Lois hurried and hurried, so that she brought the old manager panting in distress up the steps of her home. They could get no one to open the door for some time. When at last Lois ran upstairs, she found her mother dressed, but all unbuttoned again, lying back in the chair in her daughter's room, suffering from palpitation of the heart, with "Sesame and Lilies" crushed beneath her. Lois administered brandy, and her decisive words and movements helped largely to bring the good lady to a state of recovery sufficient to allow of her returning to her own bedroom.

Then Lois locked the door. She glanced at her fire-darkened face, and taking the flattened Ruskin out of the chair, sat down and wept. After a while she calmed herself, rose, and sponged her face. Then once more on that fatal night she prepared for rest. Instead, however, of retiring, she pulled a silk quilt from her disordered bed and, wrapping it round her, sat miserably to think. It was two o'clock in the morning.

IV

The fire was sunk to cold ashes in the grate, and the grey morning was creeping through the half-opened curtains like a thing ashamed when Lois awoke. It was painful to move her head: her neck was cramped. The girl awoke in full recollection. She sighed, roused herself and pulled the quilt closer about her. For a little while she sat and mused. A pale, tragic resignation fixed her face like a mask. She alone suspected the dreadful truth, and the tragedy of it, and her own proud isolation in the knowledge sustained her. Will was burned, was lost in the factory. Who knew that there had not been some foul play which had left him perhaps murdered, perhaps stunned or wounded, the victim of infuriated workmen, to be consumed in the fire. The grandeur of the tragedy alone sustained the girl. When she had fought out her conclusions and taken her attitude of dignity and silence, like some great tragedienne, she listened to the sounds in the house. She could hear her father walking downstairs, calling to one of the servant-maids.

It was dawn among the yellow fog outside, and Lois, as she moved mechanically about her toilet, vaguely felt that all her days would arrive slowly struggling through a bleak fog. She felt an intense longing at this uncanny hour to slough the body's trammelled weariness and to issue at once into the new bright warmth of the far Dawn where her lover had just awakened transfigured; for who has not stepped in imagination out of the

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chill grey dampness of another terrestrial daybreak, straight into the sunshine of the eternal morning? And who can escape his hour? So Lois performed the meaningless routine of her toilet, which at last she made meaningful when she took her black dress, and fastened a black jet brooch at her throat.

Then she went downstairs and found her father in the study eating a mutton chop. She quickly approached and kissed him on the forehead, lest he should rise to salute her, his moustache greasy. Then she retreated to the other end of the table. Her father looked tired, even haggard.

"You are early, little girl," he said, after a while. Lois did not reply. Her father continued to eat for a few moments, then he said:

"Come and have a chop—look, here's a nice one! Ring for a hot plate. Eh, what? Ah, you may as well eat, you've got to sooner or later."

Lois was insulted, but she gave no sign. She sat down and took a cup of coffee, making no pretence to eat. Her father glanced at her from time to time with the pale, nervous, baffled glance of a man who despises the source of grief, and who knows he can give no comfort.

"And our Jack's not come home yet," he said at last.

Lois stirred faintly. "Hasn't he?" she said.

"No, the young scamp. He's been up to something, I know." There was a silence for a time. They drew inevitably nearer the subject.

"Selby's was cleaned out, gutted. I thought we should have gone too, by Jove I did."

"You have no loss, dad?"

"Well, nothing to mention, nothing in comparison." After another silence, her father said:

"It's an awful thing for William Selby, whether he meant it or not. You should have seen him, he was fair struck down, fairly shrunken, like any common man. And he talked like a common man too—quite broad. By Jove! And not a word about his son, not a word, poor beggar!"

"Father," broke in Lois, "don't! You may regret more than you know, your hateful suspicions—baseless—" She ended suddenly. Her father bent his face to his plate and said nothing. After a while Lois rose and left the room. Her father sighed, and leaning his elbows on his knees whistled faintly into the fire.

Lois went down to the kitchen and asked Lucy, the parlour-maid, to go out with her. She somehow shrank from going

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alone, lest people should stare at her overmuch : and she felt an overpowering impulse to go to the scene of the tragedy.

The churches were chiming half-past eight when the young lady and the maid set off down the street. Nearer the fair, swarthy, thin-legged men were pushing barrels of water towards the market place, and the gipsy women, with hard brows, and dressed in tight velvet bodices, hurried along the pavement with jugs of milk, and great brass water ewers and loaves and breakfast parcels. People were just getting up, and in the poorer streets was a continual splash of tea-leaves, flung out on to the cobble-stones. A teapot came crashing down from an upper story just behind Lois, and she, starting round and looking up, thought that the trembling drink-bleared man at the upper window, who was stupidly staring after his pot, had had designs on her life, seeing her so well circumstanced ; and she went on her way accepting the grim tragedy of life.

In the dull October morning the ruined factory was black and ghastly. The window-frames were all jagged, and the walls stood gaunt. Inside was a tangle of twisted *débris*, the iron, in parts red with bright rust, looking still hot ; the charred wood was black and satiny ; from dishevelled heaps, soddened with water, a faint smoke rose dimly. Lois stood and looked. If he were lost in there—ah, how inevitably were all traces vanished ! She would say nothing : she alone would know : the innermost tragedy would rest immune with her.

At her side the pretty, sympathetic maid chatted plaintively. Suddenly, from one of her lapses into silence, she exclaimed :

“ Why, if there isn't Mr. Jack ! ”

Lois turned suddenly and saw her brother and her lover approaching her. Both looked soiled, untidy and wan. Will had a black eye, some ten hours old, well coloured. Lois turned very pale as they approached. They were looking gloomily at the factory, and for a moment did not notice the girls.

“ I'll be jiggered if there ain't our Lois ! ” exclaimed Jack, the reprobate, swearing under his breath.

“ Oh, Lord ! ” groaned the other as his cup overflowed.

“ Jack, where have you been ? ” said Lois sharply, in keen pain, not looking at her lover. Her sharp tone of suffering drove her lover to defend himself with an affectation of comic recklessness.

“ In quod, ” he replied, smiling sickly.

“ Jack ! ” cried his sister very sharply.

“ Fact—ask Billy. ”

The latter, however, only shuffled on his feet, trying to turn

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away his face so that she should not see his black eye. She glanced at him. He felt her boundless anger and contempt, and with great courage he looked straight at her, smiling. Unfortunately his smile would not go over his swollen eye, which remained grave and lurid.

“Is it a very bad one?” he inquired whimsically.

“What?” she inquired, very short and cold.

“My eye”—his lip curled up on one side just as ever.

She looked at him, withered him, then turned to her brother: “And what have you been doing?”

The young man glanced at his friend, and struggling against the horrid strain and discord of the situation, began to laugh.

“It was a lark though! The fun was a bit slow when we got down to the fair. We managed to pick up Bob Osborne and Freddy Mansell and one or two others, and then there was a girl with some geese. She looked like the missis of a tiger show, and they all sat like statues, her and the geese. It was Will here who began it. He wanted to pretend they were performing geese, an’ he gave the girl—she was a very Zulu—he gave her threepence and asked her to begin the show. She called him a—well she called him something, and then somebody poked an old gander to stir him up, and somebody squirted him in the eye. He upped and squawked and came at us with his neck out. Laugh! We nearly killed ourselves, keeping off those old birds with squirts and teasers. Oh, Lum! There was quite a gang of us, an’ the girl set an’ laughed like a fiend. Those old geese, oh, scrimmy, they didn’t know where to turn, they fairly went off their dots, coming at us right an’ left, and such a row—Oh, Cæsar!—it was fun, you never knew—wasn’t it though, Will? The girl she got up and knocked somebody over the jaw, but she enjoyed it, you may bet. Well, in the end, Billy here got hold of her round the waist——”

“Oh, dry it up!” exclaimed Will.

Jack looked at him, laughed, and continued: “An’ we got hold of one goose apiece—an’ they did take some holding, I can tell you—and off we set round the fair, Billy leading with the girl. The bloomin’ geese squawked an’ pecked everybody they could come in reach of. Laugh!—I thought I should a’ died—you should a’ heard the things they said. Well, they began to get mad, the folks, an’ then my goose went an’ pecked Billy’s girl on the neck, an’ he laughed like anything. It made her mad when he laughed. Then he held her for it to get her again, and she swung round in such a tear, and landed him a black eye.

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Then there was a free fight, a beauty, an' we got run in. I don't know what became of the girl."

Lois surveyed the two men. There was no glimmer of a smile on her face, though the maid behind her was sniggering. Will also was very serious. He glanced at his sweetheart and at the ruined factory.

"How's dad taken it?" he asked dejectedly, signifying the burnt place, and addressing his Lois humbly.

"As you might think," she replied coldly, "he's in an awful way. And you—you don't know what you've cost him this night. He's broken his heart, that's all. Everybody thinks you set the place on fire and then cleared off."

Lois drew herself up. She had delivered her blow: her feelings had moved her even to slang: but she had triumphed. She drew herself up, looked down on him in cold condemnation, and for a moment enjoyed her complete revenge. He was utterly cast down, very abject in his dishevelled, disfigured, unwashed condition, perhaps even a little pitiful in his forlorn misery.

"Shall I go and tell him?" said Lois relenting. Her lover glanced at her and their looks met for a moment, then he turned quickly away, feeling the tears pressing in his throat and eyes.

"You will come along," she said as she left them, and there was a slight comfort in her tone. "Lucy, will you go home and say I have just called on Mr. Selby?"