D. H. LAWRENCE AND THE BOOK OF THE SPINSTER

By Marguerite Arnold

VERY lately has emerged the book of the spinster. If signs do not fail the old maid bids fair to become a leading fictional character. She comes in like a lion; the chances are for her going out like a lamb. In the meantime, for better or worse she is with us.

Now there are a good many spinsters — "the Dead Sea fruit of odd women", one writer calls them — persistently overburdening the middle classes. By the census of 1910 there were in the United States 8,924,056 women over fifteen years of age neither married, widowed, nor divorced. Of native born white women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four, 30.6 percent were unmarried. Consequently, the old maid as heroine in fiction represents the literary enfranchisement of a considerable body of women, and this class of women has hitherto been totally unrepresented in the art of the novel.

It is really surprising to observe, as you run down the list of good old English heroines, how the girl who married or met an untimely end if she did not, has predominated. Here and there a brokenhearted creature, like Trollope's Lily Dale, clings to a parent, never more forgetting or being allowed to forget the perfidy of her betrothed when he left her for another (generally out of monetary consideration).

Ask any Ph.D. in English. There are no heroines in literature who are old maids. Is this the same thing as saying there are no novels that are not love stories? For the women, yes. There are novels in which the main issue for the hero is not love. I can think of none in which the main issue for the heroine is other than romantic.

Then why all this stir about psychoanalysis and Freud? The English novel, in its alleged interpretation of life, has been quite as much obsessed by love as the Freudian subconsciousness, especially where women are concerned. Love, unto the last echo, has been the reverberating theme.

The girl to whom the prince has not come is thrown into the discard. But lately has appeared in fiction a slight tendency to take up the discard and retrieve her fortunes at the last moment or else, *mirabile dictu*, to let her work out her own fate on the stage less ignominiously than formerly in the wings, without a lover at all.

Sarah Cleghorn, in "The Spinster", definitely, with symbolic emphasis at the end so that there cannot be the slightest doubt, gives to Ellen Graham, her heroine, a socialized art in the place of a husband. No deep, passionate rose has burgeoned in the Vermont heart of Ellen, but a little edelweiss. A few walks, a few talks, and there is nothing more. Ellen cherishes a picture, and at the end of the book Ellen replaces the picture with a letter from four persons who have learned her published poem by heart. This is no mere substitute, though a substitute is not to be sniffed at, but something as good or better.

Then there is "Miss Lulu Bett", play and novel by Zona Gale, the title proclaiming the spinster. The original ending finds Lulu, erstwhile

drudge in her sister's house, her brief marriage canceled by bigamy, going forth in conscious awakening to find a life of independence for herself.

With these appearances of the old maid in mind, I wandered into a bookstore recently and came upon "The Lost Girl". My sole acquaintance with D. H. Lawrence as novelist had been by means of Katharine Fullerton Gerould's essay published some years ago in "The Yale Review" called "British Novelists, Ltd." The essay not only limited the novelists. It annihilated them. Mrs. Gerould had not read D. H. Lawrence. She took him up to read him and found that he was J. D. Beresford. Mrs. Gerould contended that the younger British novelists are all alike anyway, writing alternate chapters for one another. So she wrote the essay without reading D. H. Lawrence.

The yellow cover adorning the book asserted:

> Why there are old maids and how to prevent them is the theme of this novel, a gripping story centering around a strikingly original heroine, and told with all the rare genius of D. H. Lawrence.

I should have known better. I purchased "The Lost Girl".

It is not a book that will help the eight million. It belies the cover in a way that does not do credit to the advertising agents. It does not explain why there are old maids, nor yet how to prevent them. It does not even show that there are old maids, for the heroine marries.

The saving grace is that Alvina Houghton has been an old maid. She marries, at thirty, an Italian out of a wandering minstrel troupe whose status in the industrial world is probably that of day laborer. This Ciccio, with slow, yellow eyes, a mandolin, and no other special means of communication, envelopes Alvina in his own "dark" beauty.

Did D. H. Lawrence plan the whole thing so as to be able to write about Italy in magical, compelling, moving contrast? There Alvina becomes the lost girl, lost, lost, completely lost — in a little hamlet of three dwellings called Califano, in the Ubrizzi hills.

"How unspeakably lovely it was, no one could ever tell, the grand pagan twilight of the valleys, savage, cold, with a sense of ancient gods who knew the right for human sacrifice. It stole away the soul of Alvina." The Italians, working in a dumb way, are lost, forlorn aborigines. The house is large, but "quite uninhabitable". Living is of course unspeakably crude and comfortless. Mr. Lawrence draws a marvelous picture of the flowering of that Italian spring, a thing made up of icy brooks and scorching suns and flashing stars. Is Alvina lost? She has for the stay of her soul only the beauty of a region that flouts man alternately with its loveliness and terror.

As a contribution to the literature of the spinster D. H. Lawrence is disappointing. What does he mean? Is this what happens to women who do not marry before they are thirty if they can let themselves "go" at all? Is it bad or good? Is D. H. Lawrence sweeping aside the precious distinction between the kinds of love? Alvina and Ciccio could hardly talk to each other. Or does he mean the point to lie in "Why have human criteria" or in "Perhaps life is more important than intelligence"?

At all events, in this strange book Alvina suffers mysteriously. And the reader wonders how Mr. Lawrence could be at once so disgusting, and boring, and beautiful. Has Mrs. Gerould yet read D. H. Lawrence?