

The Lady from Lucca

(A study in characterisation and character development in story.)

By Nick Fieldhouse

Biopics.

Anna Fantoni was born in 1956 to a single mother in Lucca, in Northern Italy, in a flat in the old medieval part of the city, hard by the city wall. She had no siblings and went to the local nursery and schools. She was naturally a very strong personality and loud and vocal, declaring her way in the world, displaying a hearty contempt for the vanities of men, which she learnt early from her mother. While her mother struggled to give her a home, Anna became something of a tomboy and dressed in jeans and a T shirt, with sneakers. She played with the boys, climbing and running around the City like the local squirrels, up and down the old masonry and walls, and in and out of the squares and fountains. Although she was brought up a catholic, inevitably, her view of the church was covered by an age old ridicule of the male priests who dominated her community, with their scant understanding of women and families, and their Italian male patriarchal culture. She felt that her mother's early pregnancy of herself, out of wedlock was proof enough of the attitudes and irresponsibility of Italian men. She was loud, impetuous and quick, but underneath lay a passionate yearning soul, hidden in the body of a young Mediterranean angel with dark eyes and hair, with olive skin.

Charlie was born in 1955 in Oxford from a Florentine mother and an English father. He had flame red hair to the shoulder and very pale skin with green eyes flecked with brown. As a school oarsman he was growing into a muscled young man with a slim light body. He walked like a cat and spoke quietly in a soft deep teenage voice, choosing his words carefully and sprinkling them with words from his three languages, English, Italian and French. He was naturally quiet, gentle and introspective, only speaking when he wanted to say something deep or, he thought, original. Charlie was a gifted Cellist and sportsman, but lazy in his pastimes, wasting his talents for other things in an emotional adolescence. He had a violently passionate and outspoken mother who had always tried to dominate him and found his silences and moody depressions infuriating, blaming the academic English father for these traits. Charlie increasingly avoided going home when he could, avoiding his little sister who took her mother's part in the frequent rows about his conduct. He found her exhausting and tiresome. His passions were girls, drink and Marijuana and he lost his virginity early to an older hippy single mother he met smoking a reefer in the parks in Oxford. She took him, slightly stoned, back to her squat and showed him how to be a young man.

The Story

The slow train groaned in to the station at Lucca, set outside the ramparts of the mediaeval city. It was market day and some of the locals had brought chickens and other goods on the train, to sell in the old piazzas. A little crowd climbed down onto the low platform in the early sunshine, and hustled its way past the ticket barriers into the station hall. Charlie and John strode past them with their rucksacks on their backs, keen to get out into the fresh air. It was 1973 and they wore the sacred uniform of youth, ankle-length suede loafers, blue jeans and T shirts, long hair and stubble, with expensive sunglasses. Charlie led from behind, enjoying the experience of his mother's country and looking round for the girls who blossomed in the August heat. John thought only of his croissant and coffee. It seemed like an age since they had eaten pizza the previous day. Charlie never seemed to think of his stomach. The granite hall of the station offered no breakfast and John walked out into the forecourt and the glare of the sun. Cars raced past on the ring-road round the ramparts and the pace of life seemed to rush towards them after the calm of the train.

Charlie and John weaved through the old City wall and into the shade of the streets. John walked straight, hoping to find a café in a square at the heart of the town. Charlie was dragging his feet again, watching some girls chattering by a fountain where the clothes were washed. They wore cotton print dresses below the knee, their dark hair tied back or plaited, brown arms waving emphatically as they described young men to their friends. John pulled at Charlie's sleeve, food first, then you can chase some skirt, he hissed. Charlie was hung over and quiet after the excesses of cheap wine the previous night. John knew he would not be much company until he had got some coffee down him. Every day seemed like a crusade for Charlie. He started out quite certain he would find a woman to love, and as the hope faded with the light, he turned to drink to drown the day. John was set on discovering that ancient lady which was Italy, a project he was having more success with. Drink was incidental, and just a part of the Italian experience.

At last John dragged Charlie under an umbrella and sat him outside a café. He gesticulated for coffee and croissants to the waiter. Charlie was saving his fluent Italian for greater things, as he gazed at a woman bending to a child in a pushchair. Maternity, it seemed, was no bar to his passion for womankind. Rather the reverse, it was some proof of sexual history to his fevered brain. John focussed on his meal and the ancient buildings all around them. At the end of the square the marble pillars of a Renaissance church towered above them in the tight space. That was the goal to aim for. There would be treasures enough to occupy Charlie and keep his mind off girls for a few minutes at least. John was beginning to dread the moment when Charlie found his girl. In his heart he knew his school friend would be oblivious to their tour the moment he struck gold. From that time on John would cease to exist.

The boys emerged from the dark of the church into dazzling sunlight. The square was busy now, and locals passed on foot, on bikes and scooters, Charlie had mooched round the old masters and the relief carving, moody in his contemplation of Madonnas with child, evidence of erotic passion long ago.

Charlie had a confession to make. He was committed to visit a cousin of his mother who lived in a flat in the old town. It was a real drag, he said, and there was a young daughter who they had to take out for lunch. It was part of the deal with Charlie's mum, which gave them access to her house in Florence. They crossed to the dark side of the street and hiked off towards the edge of the town

where his second cousin lived in an old apartment block. It was midday when they got there. The block was in poor repair and clearly social housing. Charlie was embarrassed. They rang a bell and waited. There was a mixed smell of drains and pasta in the heat of the day. Finally a woman's voice asked them to come up to the top floor. There were no lifts and so the boys toiled up a hot concrete stair well. The door to the flat was open and led straight into the living room, which was dark and hot. Bizarrely quails scurried round their feet as they stood embracing Maria. She called over her shoulder. "Anna, Viene!" They sat down and drank black coffee with little slices of pana cotta as they waited for Anna. The quails were supposed to live on the balcony and produce eggs for the table, but had become pets with free range in the flat. John looked around him discreetly. The furniture had heavy brown velvet replacement covers and the walls had cheap brash supermarket art, framed in red and gold, mixed with crucifixes and plastic icons. The curtains were mostly closed to stop the sun fading the décor. The carpets were worn and also dark brown.

Anna came in the room and strode over to Charlie and embraced him quickly in the traditional manner, doing the same with John.

"Let's go then." She said loudly, ignoring her mother completely, and walked out to the landing. Charlie was blushing furiously, his pale face bright red. He stuttered something to Maria, which may have been "Grazie" and stumbled out of the door after Anna, flicking back his red hair and looking at his shoes. John followed, shaking Maria's hand instinctively in the English manner, as if to cover for Charlie's embarrassment. The door closed and John turned in the blinding sun, to tell Charlie off for his rudeness. Then his mouth dropped as he faced Charlie and Anna.

John would never know what silent sign had passed between them in that dark flat. How could it happen like that? There they were, by the washing lines on the flat roof, leaning against the wall with their eyes closed in a tight embrace. John had indeed ceased to exist. They kissed with a passion John had never seen before. Charlie's hands were on her breast and her behind. She clung to him like a drowning woman winding her leg between his and pushing herself against his chest. John was not slow to understand that he was not required. He walked slowly down the stairs into the sunlight of the street, consulting his guide book and planning his lunch. It was to be the last time he saw Charlie.

Charlie and Anna came up for air. She turned her dark eyes away and dragged him down the stairs by the front of his belt, a willing slave to her will. She knew a place where they could get cheap marijuana, she said. Then they could go into the park and lie down together...

They staggered, arm in arm, down a narrow cobbled street near the seminary as a file of young priests approached them. Anna shouted: "Pffftttt a tutti preti!" blowing a raspberry and giving them the finger: she faced off in the middle of the street and rocking her denim pelvis at them. Those celibate boys, at the peak of their sexuality, faced this dark angel, taunting their devotion. It was mediaeval in its cruelty. They hung their heads and shuffled past.

Anna pulled her man to his fate of free love and wanton highs, so like her mother before her. John was sloughed off in the fire of this passion, Charlie like a phoenix, was rising from the ashes of his childhood.