

The Mystery of Gifford Pinchot and Laura Houghteling

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Courtesy of Grey Towers, USDA Forest Service,
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Laura Houghteling

In 1893, Gifford Pinchot, America's first forester and a founder of the American Conservation Movement, and Laura Houghteling, fell deeply in love. Both were twenty-eight years old and were from wealthy society families—the Pinchots from in and around New York City and Milford, Pennsylvania and the Houghtelings from Chicago. They planned to marry. But Laura gradually was dying and their friendship lasted only a year. There had been no time for marriage or even a formal engagement. And yet, in that short time, they created

a love that has become a mystery, a love that transcended her death and continued unabated as if she had never died.

For twenty years, Gifford secretly wrote about Laura and their on-going relationship in his private diaries as if she were a living presence who never had left him. She spoke to him, traveled with him, read books with him, advised him and inspired him. Typical entries are:

"My lady has told me beautiful things" (April 16, 1894); "I know that she is always here" (October 4, 1894); and "Tonight my Dearest spoke to me, saying she wants to be with me as much as I want to be with her" (January 1, 1895).

Because of his love for Laura, Gifford remained faithful and celibate for twenty years, showing no interest in any other woman and waiting until he was forty-nine years old to marry and have a family.

For some, Gifford's diary entries might indicate that he was a grief-stricken and troubled soul, living in a fantasy world, but during these years with Laura, he had his greatest and most celebrated accomplishments. He founded the Forest Service, and, at Yale University, the nation's first forestry school. He became a friend of President Theodore Roosevelt and convinced him to establish the national forest system which has grown to 191 million acres. He gave the American people an understanding of the importance of conservation and was the first to use this term publicly. He had a large national following who viewed him as a hero.

Throughout these years of success, Gifford believed that Laura was with him and that she had even become his wife. There is no grief in this relationship. His diaries are filled with entries describing his joy at still being with Laura. "A wonderful happy day, full of her presence and peace" (April 15, 1894). "My lady is so clearly with me that I cannot say how deeply happy and grateful I am" (December 13, 1894).

Suppressed by his family and ignored by scholars, the story of their love has never been told, and Laura Houghteling almost has been lost to history. After Gifford's death in 1946, his family donated his papers and diaries to the Library of Congress, but withheld key documents about Laura including all correspondence between her and Gifford and Gifford's diary for 1893, the year of their courtship. They have disappeared, are lost, hidden or destroyed.

Who was Laura Houghteling? Why did she have such a profound effect on Gifford Pinchot? What does Gifford really mean when he writes that she is still with him?

Here, told for the first time, over a hundred years after Laura's death and fifty years after Gifford's, is their mysterious story.

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Gifford and Laura belonged to nineteenth-century high society, a glittering world of wealth and prestige that no longer exists. They lived in a milieu of palatial mansions, country estates, servants, debutantes, balls and dinner parties with a hundred guests and perfectly matched crystal, china and silverware. Young women "came out" at eighteen and devoted themselves to being beautiful and charming and to finding suitable husbands. Often marriages were arranged as alliances between old and rich families and had little to do with romantic love.

Although Laura was from Chicago and Gifford from New York, they knew each other casually for years because members of high society stuck together

and moved in a circuit, visiting the same fashionable places every year. In 1886 and 1887, Gifford encountered Laura wintering with her family in St. Augustine, Florida. In 1888, they saw each other at a wedding in San Francisco. In the summer of 1889, their paths crossed in Marblehead and Suffield, Massachusetts. Then in 1892, their lives changed, making it possible for them to fall in love. They both moved to the popular high society resort area in and around Asheville, North Carolina, and became neighbors.

Gifford went to Asheville at the invitation of his friend, George Vandebilt, to practice forestry at Biltmore, Vandebilt's estate. Vandebilt was one of the wealthiest men in America and his estate included not only a grand home designed as a French chateau and now a famous tourist attraction, but also 20,000 acres of forest, mountains, and streams. Gifford and an assistant moved into the "Brick House" on the Biltmore grounds and, with this as their base, they travelled into the forests to survey the timber and to implement scientific forestry.

Directly across the French Broad River from Biltmore was Strawberry Hill, the country estate of the Houghtelings. It was a beautiful spot with a rambling Victorian style mansion surrounded by fourteen acres of lawns and gardens and with a view, famous throughout the region, of the River, the rolling countryside and, in the distance, mountains and forests. Postcards of Strawberry Hill were sold in Asheville and tourists rode up the Hill in their carriages to admire the view.

William Houghteling had a compelling reason for moving his family from Chicago to Strawberry Hill. His daughter, Laura, had tuberculosis. Known as consumption, there was no cure and no understanding of its contagiousness and how it spread. It also had the social stigma of being a disease of the slums and lower classes. When it attacked upper-class families, everyone was discreet. Gifford's diaries never mention the name of Laura's disease nor do the letters between family members and friends that discuss her illness. Her obituaries were equally evasive. *The Asheville Daily Citizen* stated that she died of heart failure and *The Chicago Tribune* avoided the issue by stating that she died "after a long illness."

Doctors had many theories about tuberculosis and had developed what they hoped were cures. A group of specialists believed that the mountain climate and air in and around Asheville along with new creative treatments could cure the disease. They established sanatoriums in the Asheville area and soon the wealthy and elite were moving to Asheville to be cured.

Laura's doctor was S. Westry Battle. World-famous as a specialist on consumption, he was handsome and charming, a brilliant conversationalist, a popular guest at dinner parties and Asheville's favorite society doctor. Unfortunately, nothing he ever did helped Laura or any of his other patients other than to give them and their loved ones hope.

Gifford and Laura fell in love on Strawberry Hill. It was easy for Gifford to ride his horse across the French Broad River, climb the hill and then spend the afternoon on the verandah with Laura. Soon he was staying for dinner. With their friends, they went to picnics and dances and rode horses along the French Broad River.

Adhering to the formal conventions of the time, they were chaperoned and called each other "Miss Houghteling" and "Mr. Pinchot."

The first time Gifford called her "Laura" was a moment special enough for him to record the event in a little notebook after she had died. "She was coming up the long hill above the stream when I saw her first that day, and I think you waved your hand, my darling. Then we rode past the little white cabin to a knoll overlooking the F B. [French Broad River] and there I called you, Laura, blushing very much meantime. (I felt so at least). You have told me since how surprised you were, but that you let it go because I seemed to think nothing of it."

Soon Gifford and Laura were in love. One afternoon when Marcia Houghteling, Laura's mother, had left the house to visit friends, they had their first passionate embrace. Julia Sullivan, Laura's nurse and confidante, was their chaperone that day, but Laura had sent her from the parlor to bring Gifford some tea. When she returned, she discovered Gifford and Laura in a small settee by the fireplace with Gifford holding Laura in his arms, both oblivious of Julia's presence. In a letter to Gifford, a year after Laura's death, Julia wrote, "I was so frightened I came near dropping the tray and came as very near saying 'Excuse me' or something like that. She told me all about it that night after we went upstairs to bed and she said that if I had ever said 'excuse me' she would never have forgiven me."

This first embrace was a magical moment for Laura. Julia observed, "I shall never forget how happy she seemed. She asked me then if I thought she had better tell her mother and I told her yes and the next day she did. From that time on she wanted to get well so badly. She would stay in bed and rest and then imagine that rest was all she wanted to make her well."

In the spring of 1893, Gifford and Laura began telling their friends and family about their feelings for each other. In a letter to his mother, Gifford wrote, "Miss Houghteling . . . is in great repute with all of us. I have seldom met so sane and straightforward a girl or one with so little foolishness about her. We discuss the state of the universe from time to time and arrange its details and have a very jolly time together." In a conversation with a mutual friend, Laura described her feelings for Gifford with one succinct phrase, "Mr. Pinchot - he is just glorious!"

By December, they had decided to marry and apparently Gifford asked his family for its support. This caused consternation with his parents and siblings. They knew that Laura was dying. Although they could never discuss

this with Gifford, who was convinced that she would recover and that she already was getting better, they did debate her illness and the proposed marriage amongst themselves. Gifford's sister, Nettie, championed Gifford's cause. She wrote to their mother, Mary Pinchot, "It's rather hard luck that Miss Houghteling has had health problems, but there is nothing like happiness to cure. . . . I think she must be delightful and certainly everyone says she is most charming and clever and if she looks like Mrs. Canfield [Laura's sister] there's little left to wish. . . . It's a blessing to see him so entirely recovered from the melancholy young person of last summer and I must say that I feel as if Laura Houghteling had let us back the old cheery Gifford. . . . It is comforting to hear all the lovely things which everyone says about her. . . . Dear old Gifford, he deserves to be happy, doesn't he? I am still in a wild state of excitement about it all and I can't keep my mind on Christmas presents at all!"

By New Year's, 1894, Gifford's parents gave their support and Gifford wrote to his father: "I thank you from my heart."

A month later, Laura was dead.

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There was much about Gifford and Laura to make them love each other. Laura was beautiful. Her pictures show a young slender woman with blond hair, light eyes and a warm and kind face. She is elegantly dressed with her long hair, styled on top of her head as was the fashion. In one picture, she is all in white with three strands of pearls tightly enclosing her neck adding to her elegance.

Sally Hewitt, a friend of the family, called Laura "the most brilliant and beautiful woman she ever saw." Ted Donnelly, a friend of Gifford's from Yale, who had had doubts about Gifford's plans to marry Laura wrote, "All the few lingering suspicions I had were dispelled the minute I saw Laura for she is certainly a queen." He underlined the word "queen" three times. Even Adele Sloane, a young woman infatuated with Gifford and jealous of Laura admitted rather grudgingly, in a letter to Gifford, that Laura was beautiful. She wrote that she imagined him in a "blissful frame of mind dining at Miss Houghteling's—the very name sends shivers down my back—but no, honestly, I think she is perfectly lovely and so pretty."

Gifford was equally as handsome. Six feet tall, slender and sporting a mustache that he kept all his life, he was voted by his classmates at Yale as the most handsome man in his graduating class.

Both Gifford and Laura had beautiful inner qualities as well. Gifford was a man of great integrity. His long public career, which included being the first Chief of the Forest Service, a two-term Governor of Pennsylvania and chairman or board member of numerous organizations and commissions, was untouched by scandal.

Gifford was a crusader. Instead of making money and expanding the family fortune, he devoted his life to altruistic causes, particularly conservation. He fought to stop the cut-and-run logging practices of the timber companies and opposed the exploitation of natural resources everywhere. As Chief of the Forest Service, he publicly spoke out against President Taft's plans to give away national coal fields in Alaska knowing full well that Taft would fire him. Once fired, he became a martyr and hero in the press and to the American people. His influence soared.

Much less can be found about Laura, but letters about her and Gifford's diaries indicate that she had a special inner beauty. Nurse Julia wrote: "I think in everybody's life there is a turning point and it came to me when I went away with dear Miss Laura. I had read a great deal of noble natures and beautiful minds but I thought it never existed in everyday life because I had never encountered one. Miss Laura taught me so much different. I learned how to be good and true and how to live for other people. Mr. Pinchot, I could never tell of the good she did me. She was so unselfish If there is any good in me, I have her to thank for it. She made me by her own example, considerate to others and also to be just in all things. . . . She had the happy faculty of making all that came in contact with her, love her and she was never too proud to talk to people less fortunate than herself."

By December, 1893, the Houghtelings realized that Laura's treatment in Asheville was not working and they moved her to Washington, D.C. to try a new team of doctors. According to Julia, "she cried very bitterly when she bid her father, mother and house goodbye" and that she told her room, "goodbye my pretty room, perhaps I shall never see you again and if I do I will be a healthy woman."

Laura stayed with her Uncle, Senator Frank Stockbridge of Michigan, in his large mansion which still dominates the corner of Connecticut Avenue and R Street, N.W. This was Laura's last home and, after she died, became a hallowed place for Gifford who called it "our house." Looking like an Italian Palazzo and constructed from red brick and salmon colored limestone, it is decorated on the outside with cornices, balustrades, and arches and palladium and bay windows and on the inside with marbled fireplaces, handcarved woodwork, mosaic and parquet floors and a grand staircase that climbs to the fourth floor.

Although Uncle Frank unexpectedly died three months after Laura and her relatives moved away, Gifford for years would visit "our house" late at night, apparently standing outside in the shadows in a meditative state believing that Laura was with him. Three years after her death, he wrote in his diary, "we went to our house together late tonight" (January, 1897) and then in the following year "To our house with my Laura" (April, 1898).

When Laura moved to Washington, Gifford was living with his parents in New York at Number Two, Gramercy Park and had opened a forestry consulting office on Twenty-Second Street. Whenever he could, he took the train to Washington to be with Laura, staying two blocks away from Senator Stockbridge's house at Number Two, Dupont Circle, the home of his sister, Nettie, and her English diplomat husband, Lord Johnstone. Three days after she moved in with her Uncle Frank, Laura came to visit Gifford at Nettie's. Because of her frailty, he carried her in his arms up the stairs, a tender moment that Laura treasured.

As Laura's condition worsened, Mary Pinchot decided that she had better come to Washington to see Laura and her son. This was a big event for Laura and she tried hard to make a good impression. Julia notes, "I think it was on Sunday, Dec. 31st, that your mother came to call on Miss Laura. She went down to see her and she wanted to appear so well to her. She told me on no account to bring her any medicine while your mother was in the house. . . . Miss Laura put on her red dress to go down to see her. You remember the dress, do you not? She had her picture taken in it. How she did love that pink tea gown and how lovely she looked in it."

Three days later, Laura went to bed and never walked again. Because, at first, she was too modest to let Gifford into her bedroom, he would read to her from an adjoining sitting room. Soon, however, with Julia's urging, she relented and Gifford would sit by her bedside.

Sometime in early January, 1894, Laura's doctors told her that there was no hope. Her reaction was an example of the nobility that so impressed Julia. She was more worried about those around her than about herself. Julia wrote, "When Dr. Johnson came in afterwards and told her what her fate was to be, she felt so sorry for him to think that he had to tell her. And I stood by her bed and felt as if my heart was breaking. She was so calm and collected. And she told me she expected it. And then she said 'Oh, Julia, how can I tell Gifford?' She said she knew you would not believe it, but it had to be. She had felt it for a long time."

Laura was right about Gifford. He never did believe it, before or after her death. During Laura's last days, Gifford's family agonized about him, worrying about how he would survive this ordeal, but throughout it all he never lost his hope, his courage, or his self control. Nettie wrote to their mother: "Poor Gifford looks terribly white and worn and I fancy has not slept at all. There seems nothing one can do for him as he doesn't talk of it and we don't like to ask him questions as it makes it harder for him to keep his self control. I only hope that he does not think us unsympathetic for indeed we think and talk of nothing else, and dream of him and of poor Laura all night long. He is very brave, as of course, he would always be . . . I really have not known what to do about Gifford and so far have told no one. What are you going to do?"

Gifford tried to reassure his family. In a letter to his father, James Pinchot, that is full of hope and optimism and that hints at the posthumous relationship that was to come, he wrote: "While there is no real cause for encouragement, as I greatly fear, still I am feeling more hopeful about her. . . . It seems as though it must come out as we hope, although both Laura and I have faced the other and talked it fully over and are not afraid because we know it can be nothing more than a temporary separation, short for her, however long it may be for me. She is so splendidly brave about it, so strong and unselfish, and we feel so strongly what I have just said, that it is all much less terrible than it must seem to you and indeed to anyone but ourselves. I have not been able to tell this to anyone as yet, so I am glad to write it and especially to have you and Mamee [his mother] know just how we feel for I am sure you will sympathize with us entirely."

Apparently, Gifford and Laura already had decided they would be together after her death. They had discussed it and they knew in advance just how it would happen.

On February 5, Laura spoke her last words, still thinking of others instead of herself. Julia wrote to Gifford: "And to think her last conscious words were to me and even then to think of someone else's good. Do you want to know what they were? She could hardly speak and I had to bend close to her to hear what she said. It was "Julia dear, I want you to go out this afternoon and have a good time. You've been so much in the house of late." I kissed her hand and she smiled at me and then turned her head and commenced to say a little prayer but she could not finish it. It died away and that was the last conscious thing she said. I can see it all so plainly. It lives in my memory as fresh as if it were yesterday."

Two days later at 8:45 p.m., Thursday, February 7, Laura died. Telegraphed in New York, Mary Pinchot wrote in her diary, "Laura died today. Poor Gifford." Mary McCadden, a family friend and Gifford's childhood nanny, wrote to Gifford's brother, Amos, "'When Miss Laura died, I thought my very heart would break." A college friend from Yale wrote: "It is something more precious than anything else in the world just to have loved a noble woman."

The family feared that Laura's death might devastate Gifford. Nettie wrote to Amos, "Dearest Toots, the family has no doubt let you know that Laura died last night. Gifford came at half past nine to tell us. He is taking his sorrow most wonderfully. He is so brave and quiet about it, but I think he will never be the same cherry old Gifford again. . . . Gifford has been at [Laura's Uncle Frank's] day and night since Monday and looks badly as he has had no sleep. But I don't think he will break down."

Mary Pinchot told Amos, "I have no doubt that in the end it will all come out right. Things always do when faith and hope with high mind lead the way. Gifford has all of these, though for the moment they seem to be almost veiled

by his sorrow. All does not always come out as we wish, but there is no doubt that since God so let it be, that it is right. I believe that Gifford has a high and noble mission to fulfill and I believe that he will do it—but I don't want to see him narrowing himself down to one thought. It is not right in this world to live in the past or with the dead."

Gifford continued to carry on with the same calm courage that he had shown during Laura's illness. The day after her death, he travelled with the Houghtelings to Chicago to attend her memorial service in the Chapel at Graceland Cemetery. Mrs. Houghteling wrote, "Those nearest and dearest were gathered, and triumphant songs were sung and the last that love could do was done."

Graceland remains a beautiful place, beautifully maintained. Laura's grave lies on a knoll under a tree. On her stone is "Laura Houghteling" and nothing else, not even dates. The cemetery records omit her date of birth and give her age as twenty-four, even though Gifford's notes record that she actually was twenty-eight. Perhaps high society considered it an embarrassment to be that old and still unmarried.

Gifford had no interest in her grave and never mentioned returning to the site. He knew that she was not really there.

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Gifford did not grieve Laura's death.

Immediately after the service, he returned to New York and went back to work at his forester's office, answering the backlog of mail, apologizing for his tardiness by explaining that there had been "an illness in the family." Mary Pinchot's faith that her son would overcome the tragedy appeared justified much more quickly than she and the rest of his family and friends could have hoped.

Then on March 18, 1894, thirty-eight days after Laura's death, a startling passage appeared in Gifford's diary. "My lady is very near". On April 3, she arrived, "My Darling is with me and I know it already". From then on, he felt her presence continuously. "A wonderful day with my Dearest clearly with me" (October 31); and "My Lady spoke to me tonight" (December 8).

Laura had come back to him, just as they had planned. Defying human reason, Gifford and Laura had reunited in some mysterious way. Their relationship lasted for at least twenty years and was warm and joyous. There is no sorrow in his diaries about Laura and no mention of death. Instead, the diaries are full of love, happiness and peace. "Tonight my Dearest spoke to me saying she wants to be with me as much as I want to be with her" (January 10, 1895). "A happy day with my Lady" (February 22, 1896). "A peaceful, beautiful day with my Lady" (February 23, 1896). "I was blessed with a wonderful nearness

of my Dearest in the train to Frankfurt. I could hardly help expecting to see her with my own eyes" (May 16, 1895). "A wonderful day. I dreamed of my Dearest last night and today she has been beautifully near. I can not thank our Father in Heaven enough" (June 16, 1899).

Gifford remained faithful to Laura for twenty years, his celibacy lasting until he married at the age of forty-nine. Because of his love for Laura and his lifetime commitment to moral rectitude and self-discipline, he probably was a virgin on his wedding day.

Gifford lived his inner life with Laura in secrecy. His family, friends, and colleagues would have been amazed and perhaps shocked to know that he believed that Laura was still with him. The one person he did share his secret with was Marcia Houghteling, Laura's mother. He trusted and loved her and knew that she would understand. She felt the same about Gifford. Four days after Laura's death, she sent him a note from Uncle Frank's house, "We shall always have so much in common that we must try to see each other often. Make our house, your house whenever you can and believe me [to be] your ever loving friend".

Gifford took Mrs. Houghteling at her word and actually moved into Strawberry Hill, calling it home. Laura's relatives became his relatives and Mrs. Houghteling became "Mother," a name he had not called her before Laura's death and never used in connection with his own mother whom he called "Mamee". The diaries imply that Mrs. Houghteling also believed that Laura had not really died and that she joined Gifford in his effort to reunite with her. She and Gifford would sit together in Laura's room at Strawberry Hill looking at her things and talking late into the night.

Gifford's secrecy about Laura included a code that he used in his diaries to indicate whether or not he had felt Laura's presence on a particular day. On the surface, the coded entries appear to describe the weather or what kind of day he had had. On days that Laura was with him, he would write, "a bright day" or "a clear day". If he was having difficulty reaching her, but knew that she was near, his usual entry was "Not a clear day". Sometime there were bleak days when he could not find Laura at all and the code described his pain, "a dull, dead day", "a blind day", "a lifeless, useless day", "I'm going blind".

Gifford used the code inconsistently writing about Laura, openly one day and in code the next. Because no reader possibly could be misled by these entries, it is part of the mystery why he wrote in code at all.

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What did Gifford really mean when he wrote that he and Laura were still together? How was it possible for him to maintain a twenty-year relationship with someone who was dead? This is the heart of the Mystery of Gifford and

Laura. Was he seeing ghosts, hallucinating, or living a fantasy? Had grief made his mentally unstable? Fear that this story would be interpreted negatively to show that Gifford was flawed in some way is probably the reason his family and admirers suppressed it for so many years.

The solution to this mystery is revealed in one simple diary entry. "Laura is one with God" (August 8, 1898). The relationship between Gifford and Laura after her death was spiritual. It was a private religious experience emanating from his and Laura's understanding of God. What those trying to protect Gifford's reputation never have understood is that Gifford did not think that he was seeing or hearing a physical or ghostly presence, but rather a spiritual one and that he communicated with her in his mind and through his spiritual consciousness of God.

"Tonight I saw my Lady in my Mind and I thank God for it" (April 28, 1895). "A deeper consciousness of my Dearest and her care for me" (January 13, 1897).

When Laura was with him, God was with him. When he felt close to God, he felt close to Laura. Laura's presence was God's presence. In his mind, he and Laura were united in God. "My Lady and I are on in the sight of God" (August 2, 1894). "It has been a marvelous day. My Dearest was with me this morning as I could hardly have believed possible, even after all of God's Goodness" (January 28, 1895). "A wonderful, wonderful day. Thank God for the light" (June 11, 1902).

Laura was that light. She had become "my Lady," a saint or special angel who was his teacher and guide lifting him up into the spiritual realm. While camped out in the forests of the Biltmore estate, he wrote, "Read in St. John in the morning alone and my Lady was there. Went off again in the afternoon and read and my Dear Lady was beautifully there, and we had the most happy time. She spoke to me again and filled me and warmed me. She and God" (April 22, 1894).

Their relationship became a spiritual marriage. The wedding day they never celebrated while Laura was alive took place after her death during a late night visit to "our house." "In God's sight my Lady and I are husband and wife" (April 22, 1896).

To feel Laura's presence and be spiritually married required solitude, study and quiet contemplation. Because Gifford lived a public life, this was not easy. As a result, some of his most vivid encounters with Laura occurred during the solitude he found while travelling alone on trains.

Gifford's studies consisted of reading books about God, Heaven and the afterlife to uplift his spiritual consciousness to the level of Laura's. He believed that Laura was reading them with him. Once he read a book "My Lady did not approve of". He was filled with remorse and wrote how very sorry he was. The next day she forgave him and he wrote of his gratitude for Laura's great goodness.

The books that he and Laura read together included Emerson's essays, the works of Swedenborg, and two of the most metaphysical books of the Bible, *The Gospel of John* and *Revelation*. Some of the books are long forgotten, and seldom read: *Science and a Future Life* (1893) by W. H. Myers, *The Choir Invisible* (1897) by James Lane Allen, *The Gate Ajar* (1873) and *Beyond the Gates* (1883) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1883), and *After Her Death* (1897) by Lilian Whiting to name a few.

A common theme runs through these obscure nineteenth-century works. When a loved one dies, that person has not left us. Although in heaven and invisible, our beloved still loves us and helps us and will be waiting to greet us when we too pass into the spiritual realm.

In *After Her Death*, Lilian Whiting instructed her readers on how to communicate with someone whom we love who has died. "The only true, permanent, and satisfactory way to live in companionship and communion with those who have passed through the experience of death is to live in the spirit, to live now and here, every day and every hour, the spiritual life. . . . The problem of communication with those who have passed into the unseen lies with us, rather than with them; it lies in our own purification and exaltation of life." This passage is an accurate depiction of how Gifford reached Laura.

During the years that Laura was a divine presence in his life, Gifford achieved his most famous successes and believed that the inspiration Laura gave him was at least partly, if not entirely, responsible. For example, after a speech in Philadelphia on January 18, 1896, he wrote, "I spoke as my Lady's servant" and after testifying as Chief Forester of the Forest Service before a Senate Committee on March 24, 1906, "I felt today my Lady's help."

Gifford was not content just to communicate with Laura. He wanted a complete and permanent reunion and worked to make it happen. He called it "the good time" or "the good thing" and he believed that it was coming very soon. "Laura spoke to me again saying it would not be long" (June 13, 1894). "The good thing is surely coming" (July 5, 1894). "My Lady spoke to me again and I think this is the beginning of the good time" (August 1, 1894). "It will not be long" (January 25, 1895). "The promise is so sure" (March 29, 1895). "On the train while reading a short life of Emerson, I suddenly had the thought that I must catch up quickly, for the end of my probation is not far off. Surely it came from my Dearest. I am very happy tonight."

These are the most mysterious passages in the diaries and seem to imply that Gifford anticipated leaving the human experience altogether in the very near future. Somehow through spiritual study, he would rise above his human body and life and become one with Laura and God for eternity. As he wrote on May 4, 1896, "One beautiful moment in the afternoon. I think it meant that I was right in believing that the natural body is not raised, but a wholly spiritual body." Gifford hoped that his spiritual body would be raised to the level of Laura's as soon as possible.

What incredible love Gifford had for Laura to want to leave his family and friends, his successful career, his crusade for forestry and his growing fame to be with her now and forever, somewhere in the spiritual world beyond the grave. Being with Laura had become more important to him than all his goals and successes. How he expected this "good thing" to happen and "the good time" to come is part of the mystery. Would he die or simply vanish from human view?

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On August 15, 1914, Gifford Pinchot married Cornelia Bryce. Gifford was forty-nine; Cornelia thirty-three. Compared to Laura, Cornelia looked plain, but as the great granddaughter of Peter Cooper of New York, she was an heiress to one of the City's largest fortunes. This was a grand alliance of two old and wealthy New York society families.

Cornelia did not lead the normal life of a young woman of society. Not only was it unusual that she was thirty-three, rich and still unmarried, but also she was one of the nation's early feminists, campaigning for suffrage and better working conditions for women, sometimes even picketing at factory gates.

Gifford's and Cornelia's wedding was simple and rushed, not at all what one might expect for two people of their social status. Not until August 5, only nine days before the wedding, did Cornelia give her "final yes". The only mention in the diaries of a courtship is a day of fishing at Gray Towers, the Pinchot country estate near Milford, Pennsylvania, a drive in a park in Philadelphia, and a picnic. The ceremony on Long Island included only family and a few close friends.

Gifford and Cornelia were married for thirty-two years and had one child, Gifford Bryce Pinchot. By all accounts, the marriage was a success. Cornelia continued to pursue her many causes while at the same time helping Gifford further his career. They were good companions.

With Gifford's wedding, Laura abruptly disappears from his diaries. The last entry is on July 30, 1914, fourteen days before the wedding, "Not a clear day".

After so many years of total loyalty to Laura why did Gifford marry? The best explanation is his sense of duty to his family. Gifford was the eldest and the favorite of his parents. They wanted him married with a family. His father had died in 1908 without seeing this accomplished and now his mother was dying. A formidable matriarch, Mary Pinchot made it clear that she wanted to see her beloved Gifford married before she died. There was not much time. Immediately after the wedding, Gifford and Cornelia hurried to her bedside in New York. Nine days later, Mary Pinchot was dead, all her dreams of a successful life for her son fulfilled.

Where was Laura during this courtship, wedding and long marriage? Had Gifford stopped loving her? There are compelling reasons to believe that Gifford loved Laura for the rest of his life. He never threw away their letters, his mementos of her, or her pictures. He stored them lovingly at Grey Towers in a blue box ordered from Tiffany's just for this purpose. The box is still there, battered and faded. His diary entries about Laura continued during his courtship with Cornelia almost to the wedding day itself. The fact that they then abruptly stop does not necessarily mean that he was no longer thinking about Laura, but more probably indicate his respect for his marriage and for Cornelia and her feelings. He knew that someday she might read his diaries.

Gifford's marriage obviously was arranged for him for practical reasons and certainly was not generated by spontaneous feelings of love and passion. What few diary entries there are about Cornelia are warm, but without the emotional intensity of those about Laura. One can imagine Mrs. Pinchot and Mrs. Bryce negotiating in their townhouse parlours, reminiscent of an Edith Wharton novel. Both had a problem. Gifford was showing no interest in ever getting married and Cornelia was becoming unmarriageable because of her age and radical views. A marriage between them may have seemed like the perfect solution.

In Gifford's mind, he already was married, but the books that he and Laura studied explain that one can have a spiritual marriage that lasts for all eternity and a human marriage that is only temporary. If one's true spouse dies, sometimes it is necessary to marry again, but this marriage ends when one dies and is reunited forever with the true husband or wife.

Swedenborg was one of Gifford's favorite spiritual writers and he even attended a Swedenborg church in Washington, D.C. In *Marital Love* (1765), Swedenborg wrote:

Marriages contracted in the world are for the most part external and at the same time internal, when nevertheless it is the internal union, which is of the souls, which really constitute marriage. . . . No other partners can be received permanently in heaven except those inwardly united or capable of being united as it were, into one. Two partners, these are not even called two, but one angel. . . . The spirit of the deceased partner dwells constantly with the spirit of the partner still living and does so to the latter's death, when they meet again, are reunited, and love each other more tenderly than they did before, being in the spiritual world. . . . If they do contract something like marriage, they do so for reasons aside from [true] marital love, and these reasons are all external.

Gifford may have believed that Laura, his "internal" wife, had released him to have an "external marriage." Throughout 1913, he had had difficulty

finding Laura. For over a year his diary entries read "Not a clear day". Then suddenly on March 16, 1914, Laura returned for one day only on a train from Chicago to the West Coast. "A clear and happy day".

Five months later Gifford married Cornelia.

* * *

Somehow Gifford and Laura found eternal love; at least they did in Gifford's consciousness. How this could happen is the mystery. What began as a tragic human love story became a joyous spiritual love. Gifford protected this love through complete secrecy and it has remained a secret for a hundred years.

Laura Houghteling was physically beautiful, but it was the beauty of her inner spirit that made this love story possible. As Nurse Julia wrote, Laura was "an angel of goodness". After her death, she became Gifford's angel, his guide and inspiration.

In the blue box at Grey Towers is an old wallet, torn and falling apart. Inside is a folded piece of paper with an excerpt of a poem by John Luckey McCreery, copied in Gifford's handwriting. Gifford must have treasured this poem to have carried it with him, perhaps everyday.

*There is no death although we grieve
When beautiful, familiar forms
That we have learned to love are torn
From our embracing arms.*

*They are not dead. They have but passed
Beyond the mists that blind us here
Into the new and larger life
Of that serener sphere.*

*They have but dropped their robe of clay
To put their shining raiment on
They have not wandered far away
They are not lost or gone.*

*Though disenthralled and glorified
They still are here and love us yet
The dear ones they left behind
They never can forget.*

*And sometimes when our hearts grow faint
Amid temptations fierce and deep
Or when the wildly raging waves
Of grief or passion sweep —*

*We feel upon our fevered brow
Their gentle touch, their breath of balm
Their arms enfold us, and our hearts grow
comforted and calm*

*And ever near us, though unseen
Their deer immortal spirits tread
For all the boundless universe
Is Life — there are no dead.*

And so it was for Gifford Pinchot and Laura Houghteling. To them these verses were not just pretty sentiments; they were fundamental truth.

“My Lady is so clearly with me that I cannot say how grateful I am” (December 12, 1894).

“She fills me” (April 26, 1895).