

ANEMONE



*Who can find a virtuous woman ?
For her price is far above rubies.
The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her..
She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.*

*She stretcheth out her hand to the poor;
yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.
Her husband is known in the gates,
when he sitteth among the elders of the land.*

*She openeth her mouth with wisdom ;
and in her tongue is the law of kindness . . .
Her children arise up, and call her blessed ;
her husband also, and he praiseth her.*

*Many daughters have done virtuously,
but thou excellest them all.
Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain :
but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.*

—The Bible

SHE was a silken thread and her sister a wire. They paired off together—in the midst of many sisters and brothers. They grew on a precarious edge, between Hindu respectability and Christian climbing, between the memory of the *Zamindari* heroically sacrificed by their father and the dubious importance of his position as parish priest in a small town. In the first photograph, she is a child, in a heavy, heavily patterned silk gown, her hair starched and curled, her face troubled, surrounded by many lookalike sisters.

Their father prided himself on his learning. He taught the girls in his study. They read English literature; they spoke Bengali and Hindi. Their mother played the piano and sewed sleeved Victorian

resses. She worried about her many marriageable daughters.

Their mother took them when visiting in a curtained horse carriage. They drew water from a well and read by lantern light. They dreamed. They read in their father's newspaper of a teacher's training college and begged to be sent there.

In the second photograph, she is already a picture, a picture made to be seen. Gazing eyes have created her with the beauty of a startled gazelle. Covered yet exposed. Alone in the frame, delicate in lace and curves. But her eyes do not wish to be seen, they are withdrawn. A hundred years later, men still exclaim at the picture and ask for a copy.

While at college, her own and her sister's marriages were arranged. Her

sister met the man in a curtained drawing room. The family left them together for a while—had they not read Austen and Dickens? Had she not been carried in a veiled carriage? Between two worlds, her sister fell into a dark area of silence. Behind the curtains of the drawing room, her sister went through what should have happened only behind the curtains of the bedroom ; only under the bridal, not the betrothal veil. The veil of innocence proved a shroud.

Her sister was spirited away for months. She bore a baby which was made to disappear. The man too disappeared.

Her own engagement broke. She was 28. She had a teacher's training diploma. Her father had grown old overnight. She

went to church; she helped her mother with cooking, with the younger ones. On Saturday evenings, she played badminton. A young man saw her playing and was struck by her graceful movements. He proposed—to the picture in the frame. They were engaged. He crossed the seven seas, to the land of ambitions, the land of fears—to study, to improve his prospects. She waited.

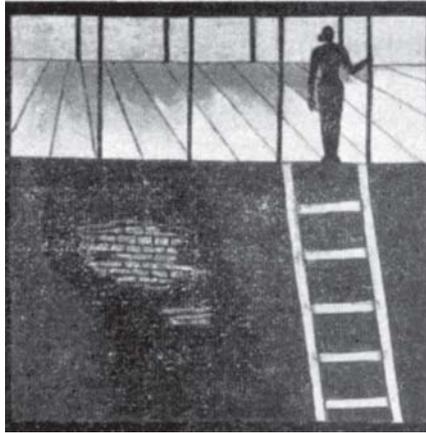
When he returned, religious madness had seized him. Imperial madness. He was a man—alien to her. Her parents told her to break this engagement. But their eyes were dark—with the shadow of a confused son and a hidden daughter. She bowed her head. She walked to her destiny with a smile on her lips. She was true to her love. Her sister protested vehemently. They parted in an orgy of weeping.

After marriage, he took her far away. She was a perfect wife. She learnt his language. She wore his creed like a cloak. His doctrines were her faith, his passions her ceremony. Who shall find a virtuous...

Her perfection pleased him. But perfection can hurt—like a catch in the throat. Is it so easy? Was he not striving? He strove to be righteous. His epistles were the wonder of all who received them—his family, her family. Her father was outraged. A battle had begun—she was besieged by clashing swords. She was forced to echo his writings in her own convent girl script. She too wrote letters, she too wrote hymns. Had she not one father in heaven? Had she not one husband?

Her children, pinioned in their bedrooms by nursemaids, heard her sobbing in her bedroom. Behind curtains. They never saw her face without a smile. They never heard her voice without sweetness. She will do him good...

Her father could not believe that she, his daughter, could write him such letters. He knew that the hand was hers, the mind his son-in-law's. He was old and sorrowful. He abandoned her to her fate. Only her sister continued to write to her, stifling anger. They were not to



see each other for years. They became for each other a memory of youth, a stubbornly cherished faith.

Her husband now had his own congregation, bred in his shadow. They were riven, rebellious but awestruck. She made her kitchen a well of bounty, her courtyard a garner. She became the lady most blessed, the mother ever giving. Her husband's friends worshipped her, his enemies praised her. No one could find words bright enough to shower upon her. For her price is far...

But she felt that her husband was too great and too good for her. She obeyed his edicts without question. She sheltered her children, albeit unconsciously. She began to teach other children in her house.

She knew that he was always right. But her intelligence was an embrace as his was an exclusion. She watched his fierce battles—with colleagues, with congregation members, with his own family members.

To battle was in his blood. A pretext always arose. No one was righteous enough to satisfy him. Her husband is known.

She had not the equipment to intervene. In the photograph taken when she is 50, she laughs in her own garden. Fulfilled and glowing. Beneath the maternal fullness of health, delicacy persists in the cheekbones, the light shadows under her eyes. Her children rise....

The most terrible battle had just

begun. The children wanted to marry but their father thought nothing too good for his children. He remembered his caste and his Cambridge education, his village and his department. He waved his arms in battle. He thought their choices were a way of hitting at him, of pulling his work to pieces. He could scarcely believe it, at first. But he rallied. He would stand alone. He cursed the strangers and cut off the children. He would receive them back only as suppliants, on his terms. He sternly forbade her to gather them under her wings. She had been made to forget her father's and her brother's titles. She had written secretive letters to her dearest sister. But that is the fate of sisters, of women. She had learnt to survive though uprooted, in heat and duststorms, with little rain. How could she forget her children's names? And the others—were they not her children too? Had she not fed them and watched them grow, play, sing around her piano?

She should have wept and succumbed. But she began to take faltering steps. She attended her daughter's wedding alone. She watched her son give away the bride. She was in mourning. She doubted. But her mind had never learnt to doubt. She was like a child who is learning to walk, alone with an adult who forces it to sit still. Her husband also. ...

Now they two were alone, in the huge, the dark house. The congregation was scattered; the children flown—their letters forbidden her, their children seen only in pictures, in dreams. She was a shrinking girl once more, but her mother, her brothers, her sisters had died. Only her father remained, in different robes, his shadow curtaining the windows, blotting out the sun. He was teaching her, but only one Book—rewritten by himself. Literature was not on the shelves, language she had long forgotten.

The thread gave way.

She happened to be on a rare visit to her niece's house. She took a chair on to the terrace and sat there, all day, waiting

for her daughter. But her daughter did not come. The son-in-law had forbidden it.

Towards evening, her husband came to fetch her. She refused to go. Words burst from her in a torrent, a deluge. They stood, silenced, around her.

“Now I am with my own people. I’ll stay here. I’m not going with you. Don’t come near me. Don’t touch me. I don’t want any man to touch me. Only women can touch me. Gently. Like a butterfly,” She openeth her mouth.

She recalled myriads of incidents of their life together—how he had chosen everything, from the colour of the carpet to the wording of letters, from the length of a visit to the meaning of a prayer. She reproached him for everything he had done, said, been. Terrified of her scorching judgment, he stood in the dock, surrounded by her people, who knew the story but had nothing to say.

She retreated to the first frame. She became the girl in the picture. She called her daughters her sisters and her son her brother. She used the old words and endearments. She retraced all the steps, erased her mistakes, reclaimed un-lived youth. She refused to recognise him.

Relatives flocked to her bedside. Her speech was lucid. Everything she said they understood. But was it possible that she, the perfect, the loving and beloved wife, the gracious lady, could ever harbour such thoughts, let alone speak such words? Impossible. But she was not herself. She had lost her mind. They curtained her with forgiveness and pity. They called doctors to give her sedatives, to put her to sleep. She fought wildly but they overpowered her. The family rallied around her.

Her husband was outraged. He walked away in righteous indignation. Even she, his only faithful follower, had deserted him. He was alone. The righteous man is destined to be alone. Nevertheless, something shook him. He felt the uncertain, accusing eyes of her children—who were always more her children than his—upon him. He remembered the steely eyes of her sister.



He shuddered.

No doctor could diagnose her illness. They offered words. The family seized the words and used them as shields against her words.

Her husband pulled himself together. He took back the bitter rebukes that had escaped him when first she changed. He took command of the situation. He took her back to his house where she belonged. He allowed none else to nurse her. He watched over her night and day. In interludes, she broke out. But she was alone. She could not but be subdued. And grateful. Always grateful. A woman that fears...

No one could praise him enough. What a good, what a caring

husband. To serve a mad wife, hand and foot. In his old age, too.

In the last photograph, all the curtains have fallen—the *parda* curtain and the Victorian lace curtain, the drawingroom curtain and the bedroom curtain, even the sickroom curtain. Her face is that of the troubled child and the petulant youth, her face is that of a sick old woman who has fallen to pieces, not having lived.

He covered her grave with writing—with songs to the father and son, written by her in his borrowed phrases. But her sister, grown a redoubtable old woman, could still intimidate him. “That man—he killed my sister.” She remembered; she imagined much of this story. □