The Gender of Modernism
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Sylvia Townsend Warner
(1893–1978)

Introduced and Edited by Jane Marcus

Appropriately for a leftist and a writer of folk and fairy tales, the English poet and novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner died on May Day, 1978, at the age of eighty-four, the author of seven novels, nine books of poetry, ten volumes of short stories, a biography of T. H. White, a translation of Proust’s Contre Sainte-Beuve, and numerous essays and reviews.¹ The publication of some of her letters in 1982 by her editor at the New Yorker, William Maxwell, and Collected Poems, edited by Claire Harman in 1983, followed the feminist revival of her work in the 1978 reprint by the Women’s Press in London of Warner’s brilliant prize-winning 1926 novel, Lolly Willowes. Along with Rebecca West’s Harriet Hume, this is an example of a form one might call feminist fantastic realism, the direct forerunner of Angela Carter’s work.² Townsend Warner’s letters, as dazzling as Virginia Woolf’s, give some idea of the extraordinary range of her talent: “The day before yesterday, I appeased a life-long ambition: I held a young fox in my arms. . . . I held him in my arms & snuffed his wild geranium smell, and suddenly he thrust his long nose under my chin, and burrowed against my shoulder, and subsided.
into bliss. His paws are very soft, soft as raspberries. Everything about him is elegant—an Adonis of an animal."

Like Antonia White, Warner was the daughter of a schoolmaster. She grew up at Harrow, enduring, like Woolf, the bliss and terror of an autodidact's self-education in her father's library. Starting her career as "that odd thing—a musicologist," she spent the decade 1917–1927 as one of four editors of the ten-volume Oxford University Press Tudor Church Music, "romantically engaged in tracing, scoring and collating Masses, Motets" and other pieces from manuscript sources. World War I changed the course of her life. Her intent was to compose, but the war shut off the chance of going to Germany to study with Schönberg. Her first published work was an essay on her job as a relief munitions worker in Blackwoods Magazine in 1916. She claimed that she became a poet to fill up the leftover sheets of "beautiful smooth white photographic paper" on which she inscribed early musical texts. The very musicality of her poetry, the attention, like Edith Sitwell's, to rhythm and qualities of sound, coupled with a dry, bleak English pastoral irony which critics have likened to Hardy and to her close friend and fellow Dorset writer T. F. Powys, may suggest some of the reasons modernism has not claimed her as a major poet.

But, as Celeste Schenck argues, new definitions and the elasticizing of stylistic considerations, beyond valorizing the style of Eliot and Joyce, bring to light some dazzling uncannonized women poets. The project of this volume is to expand the canon to include those puzzling writers, such as Warner, whose vertical lines of descent from other poets and horizontal lines of affiliation with writers of her own age zigzag across the history of twentieth-century writing on any path but the straight. "Scoured table, pray for me," Warner writes in "Woman's Song," "All things wonted, fleeting, fixed, / Stand me and myself betwixt, / Sister my mortality" (Collected Poems, 19, 20). The domestic scene, especially the hearth, grounds her poetry for tart and troubled deconstructions of family, state, and sexual ideologies. Politics are pursued on the plane of the fantastic in her elfin stories as diligently as her fellow Marxists exploited realism. In "Wish in Spring" from The Espalier (1927) Warner notes that writing is hard work. If it were as natural as leaves on trees "then I should have poems innumerable, / One kissing the other; / Authentic, perfect in shape and lovely variety, / And all of the same tireless green color . . . / But as I am only a woman / And not a tree, / With piteous human care I have made this poem, / And set it now on the shelf with the rest to be." Explicitly denying divine inspiration or the high calling of Eliot or Pound, Townsend Warner compares poems to cups and saucers and writing to domestic labor, valorizing, as Woolf does in her portraits of charwomen, women's daily work at the same time as she demystifies and undoes the "dignity" of art and artists.

In the introduction to Collected Poems, Claire Harmon, whose official biography was published in 1989, makes a case for the brilliance of Opus 7 (1931), a long narrative satire in couplets reminiscent of Crabbe whose heroine is the
hard-drinking Rebecca Random, forced by postwar poverty to sell flowers to pay for her gin. Revising modernism to include this poem unsettles definitions and sisters the critic’s own mortality. If we privilege lyric fragmented voices from this period, what to do with this other tradition, the daughter of *Aurora Leigh*? Townsend Warner wrote the verse novel as well as Tudor metrical conceits, the dark and dramatic Hardyesque as well as the committed communist ballad. Her multivoicedness and creation of character in dramatic soliloquy calls out for a critical extension of Bakhtin’s work on the novel to poetry. In the age of metropolitan modernism, Warner politicizes the pastoral. A storyteller at heart, she shaped poetry for story as she molded the short story and novel for lyric and for history, and she set all the forms at her disposal dancing to the tune of politics.

With her lover, poet Valentine Ackland (1906–1969), Warner in 1933 published *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, dedicated to Robert Frost, a duet whose authorship was not attributed in individual poems as a protest from the Left, an “experiment in presentation” designed to unsettle ideas about individual genius and to question the social modes of canon formation, exactly as this anthology does. Destabilizing the comforts of attribution for the reader, *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* confronts contemporary critical concerns with subject positions, subjectivity, and authorial identity. When Ackland’s poetry is collected—for she has received even less attention than Warner—the picture of “Sapphic modernism” sketched by Shari Benstock in *Women of the Left Bank* may be filled in somewhat. Literary historians of the 1930s have largely left women out of Left history, and one of the most urgent projects of the revision of modernism must be the recording and revival of those voices. Politics, in particular the documentation of the work done by women writers who fought fascism in Spain, is beginning to receive the attention it deserves by Barbara Brothers and by Wendy Mulford in her fine study of Warner and Ackland.

Valentine Ackland’s *For Sylvia: An Honest Account*, a moving lesbian autobiography, records Ackland’s struggles with alcoholism as well as her childhood and brief and appalling experience in marriage. Her conversion to Catholicism adds to the growing list of modernist women, sometimes lesbian, sometimes bisexual, whose artistic and gender identities were bound up with a relationship to the church. Radclyffe Hall, Una Troubridge, Antonia White, Emily Coleman—they all ask us to consider the relationship of Catholicism to modernisms other than Joyce’s. An interesting place to begin this inquiry is with Christopher St. John’s *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul*. St. John was an early and active suffragette, a drama and music critic, the lover of Edy Craig (Ellen Terry’s daughter, who was a feminist theatrical producer), one of the models for Miss LaTrobe in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, and the author of a biography of the composer Dame Ethel Smyth.

Beyond the scope of this volume but essential to its project is continuing study of modernist women in music, drama, and dance. What is the relation of female modernism to the struggle for the vote? The great outpouring of women’s writing in feminist political pamphlets ought to be examined, as well
as suffrage plays and novels. The peace movement and women’s World War I novels deserve study, as well as the relationship of feminism to vorticism and surrealism. One large gap is being filled by Brothers’s and Mulford’s work on women and the Spanish Civil War. As Brothers points out, Warner’s neglect occurs on many fronts. Left out of the literary histories of the Spanish Civil War presumably because she was a woman, she is left out of literary modernism because she was a communist and a lesbian. But she does not reappear in the Norton Anthology of Literature by Women or in Gilbert and Gubar’s No Man’s Land.

Brothers discusses Warner’s Spanish Civil War poetry and her political novels, After the Death of Don Juan (1938) and Summer Will Show (1936). In “A Wilderness of One’s Own” in Squier I discuss the fantastic realism of Lolly Willowes as a literary response to the failure of realism to imagine new gender possibilities after the suffrage movement and the war. Mr. Fortunes’s Maggot (1927) and The True Heart (1929) have been reprinted by Virago; the latter is a Victorian Cupid and Psyche story about a determined servant and her beloved, a mentally retarded upper-class man. Warner was always turning fictional plots upside down. In The Flint Anchor (1954) it is a “patriarch” who is oppressed by the ideology of the family. The Corner that Held Them (1948), a brilliant recreation of life in a fourteenth-century convent, is like no other historical novel I have read. Umberto Eco’s all-male world in The Name of the Rose might be simply a masculine version of convent life set in a different country. Can our present concepts of modernism expand from definitions of fragmented or lyrical fiction to include the feminist or Marxist historical novel as Warner conceived it?

Eleanor Perenyi sees Warner’s historical novels as hallucinatory, the writing of dreams of lived past reality, original and compelling in this peculiar genre because history is presented as somehow more real than life. It is in Summer Will Show that Warner most fully confronts the question “What is the role of the bourgeois (and female) intellectual in making the revolution?” Set in Paris during the revolution of 1848, it imagines Marx himself answering the question; and in the love affair between the rich English gentlewoman, Sophia Willochy, and Minna, her husband’s beautiful revolutionary Jewish mistress, the novel rewrites the plot of the English novel (by women) as we know it and liberates the reader into a world of difference, racial, sexual and political, which is astonishing as well as disquieting. Minna tells a spellbinding tale of a pogrom that links racial and sexual otherness with revolutionary political activity and writing. Sophia’s black nephew, the “issue” of Britain’s slave trade, becomes the agent of French state forces against the radicals, killing the Jewish refugee as patriarchy refuses to recognize his paternity.

My choice of Warner’s texts for this volume is eccentric. “Cottage Mantleshelf” is a World War I poem that contains in its attack on couples and coupling a radical critique of Western dualism and its structures of binary opposition. Suffused in rose light and contrary images of England and roses, like Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, it overturns the homoerotic text of British poetry of this war with the instrument of class. Like Septimus, “young Osbert,” the
“nancy boy,” is a “scapegoat,” disowned by the nation for whom he gave his youth. This pink and black Art Deco portrait of the mantleshelf of the Home Front interrogates the reproductive ideology that underwrites the war narrative, critiquing the heterosexual plot and its cultural reproduction in pairings on the working-class hearth, as well as parodying the patriotism of Laurence Binyon’s “For the Fallen” and the love and war poetics of Antony and Cleopatra. Warner’s work does not participate in Sandra Gilbert’s paradigm of the sex war as the key to modernism. In fact she sees through the limitations of that metaphor.

Warner’s Peter Le Neve Foster lecture of 1959 (“Women as Writers”) is included here because it clearly demonstrates that feminist criticism did not appear suddenly in the 1970s with no predecessors. At a low point in the history of Woolf’s reputation as a writer, Warner’s lecture revived interest in Woolf’s then forgotten text, A Room of One’s Own, specifically as the mother text of socialist-feminist criticism.

By allusion and deliberate intertextuality with A Room, Warner resurrected a dead text and playfully invented as companions for Judith Shakespeare her own fictional Joan Milton and Françoise Rabelais. Obstnacy and slyness are the characteristics of women writers, she says, continuing Woolf’s connection of women writers as outsiders with Shakespeare: “It is a dizzying conclusion, but it must be faced. Women, entering literature, entered it on the same footing as William Shakespeare.” She again intrudes the element of class into the analysis of writing and gender, longing for a woman Clare or Burns or Bunyan. Woolf’s peroration argues that the woman Shakespeare will come from the working class. Warner discusses women as middle-class writers and tries to imagine a royal princess writing a play. She anticipates feminist critical discussions of the Victorian attribution of morality to women and also, tellingly, she sees the twentieth-century superwoman on the horizon. Her hilarious play on institutionalized misogyny resonates in the application of “MacHeath’s Law”: “She may invent but she may not write down. MacHeath’s Law explains why the early women writers caused so little alarm. They only went off one at a time.”

“Bluebeard’s Daughter” is a fable from The Cat’s Cradle-Book (1940), a collection that destabilizes the genre of fable and offers a fundamental moral challenge to humanism and its arrogant self-reflexivity by asserting that the origin of the storytelling impulse is in cats. Crossing the boundaries between the animal and the human, Warner, like Woolf in Flush, undoes the inescapability of all categorical imperatives, gender, nation, language and history. A witty critique of the scholarly pursuit of the Ur-language, cultural anthropology as a discipline, and all forms of textual scholarship, The Cat’s Cradle-Book is the “text” of all the collated cat narratives collected by a man who is expiating his guilt at the death of his beloved Siamese, Haru, because he couldn’t bear to let her out to mate when she was in heat nor could he consummate his own desire. Warner’s narrator agrees that the art of narrative was invented by cats and, further, that the origin of narration is in lactation.

It is mother cats who tell stories to their nursing kittens. Like modern critics...
collecting the tales of the Other, the collector brings a disease upon the subjects of his study, objectifying them in pursuit of his ideal pure text. The obvious lessons are not lost on the reader.

"Cat is not a recognized language," she writes. How are you to convince people that what is roughly a vocabulary of guttural and mew can convey such fine shades of meaning?" All marginalized literatures and peoples share this problem. They do not have the same grammar and syntax as the dominant language, and they are defined by difference (as the dominant define culture and language in their difference from those "gutturals and mews"). The reader of "Bluebeard's Daughter" is confronted by Warner's deconstructive urge. If Bluebeard was a bad husband, how do we know he was also a bad father? she asks, taking one of the most powerful myths of our culture and turning it upside down. Djamileh's mouth is stained blue like her hair of "deep butcher's blue." She is the daughter of the patriarchy, like all women as they inhabit the role of bluebeard's daughter. Their fathers have murdered their mothers for the sin of curiosity (otherwise known as the desire for history) in wanting to know the stories of women. Djamileh does not choose revenge. Behind the locked doors which her husband's curiosity wants to open is no mystery. She channels their desire to know into the mutual study of astronomy. This fable is an answer to Woolf's Shakespeare's sister, in which the martyr is replaced by the survivor.

Just as The Cat's Cradle-Book challenges the disciplines for robbing the subjectivity of the peoples and stories they study, so "Bluebeard's Daughter" gives us a feminist fable with a twist. Warner's text should be read against Béla Bartók's brilliant modernist opera Bluebeard's Castle (1911), which, like much male modernism, blames the victim and rewrites the legend to exonerate Bluebeard, whose last wife, significantly named Judith, is jealous of his previous relationships and greedily invades his privacy. George Steiner takes Bartok's revisionist misreading even further from questions of gender. His Bluebeard represents establishment culture, which will not come to terms with the holocaust or pay serious attention to science. Judith is not a woman. She stands for the human urge to open all doors. This appropriation of the oppressed victim as a representation of man's plight, as in Geoffrey Hartman's denial of gender in the Procre and Philomel myth in "The Voice of the Shuttle," is one of the characteristics of the modernist rewriting of history. Sylvia Townsend Warner's story tells us that the daughter of a monster is not herself a monster, that men are not necessarily the enemy. They can be educated to intellectual inquiry.

NOTES

1. Warner's ten volumes of short stories include fables, elfin tales, and realist fiction, spanning her whole career, many first published in the New Yorker.
2. See the discussion in my "Wilderness of One’s Own."

3. Quoted in Perenyi.

4. An excellent discussion of Warner’s politics is in Mulford. A reevaluation of women writers and World War I is under way. See the 1989 Feminist Press reprints of Not So Quiet. . . . by Helen Zenna Smith (Eva Price) and We That Were Young by Irene Rathbone, with Afterwords by Jane Marcus.

5. See Schenck's introductions to Mew (section 15) and Wickham (25) in this volume and her essay in Women Writers in Exile, ed. Broe and Ingram.


7. For a discussion of Hungerheart, see Nina Auerbach, Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time, New York: Norton, 1987. On Catholicism and lesbianism, see Joanne Glasgow’s essay in Glasgow and Jay (see n. 6). On Emily Coleman, see Mary Lynn Broe’s essay on Hayford Hall in Broe and Ingram.

8. For a critique of Gilbert’s “Soldier’s Heart,” see my “Asylums of Antaeus” and my Afterword to Smith; see also Tyelee.

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Women as Writers

(The following is the text of the Peter Le Neve Foster Lecture which Sylvia Townsend Warner delivered to the Royal Society of Arts on 11 February 1959.)

When I received this invitation to lecture to the Royal Society of Arts on "Women as Writers" (and here let me express my thanks to the responsible committee, and to the shade of Peter le Neve Foster, whose family founded the lectureship, and to my Chairman)—when I received this invitation, it was the invitation that surprised me. The choice of subject did not. I am a woman writer myself, and it never surprises me. Even when people tell me I am a lady novelist, it is the wording of the allegation I take exception to, not the allegation itself. One doubt, it is true, crossed my mind. It was inevitable that I should remember a book called A Room of One's Own, by Virginia Woolf. What had I to add to that? But A Room of One's Own, I thought, is not so much about how women write as about how astonishing it is that they should have managed to write at all. As they have managed to, there might still be something I could add. But then I reread my invitation, and became the prey of uneasiness. Women as Writers. Women as Writers. Supposing I had been a man, a gentleman novelist, would I have been asked to lecture on Men as Writers? I thought it improbable.

Here was an implication I might or might not resent. Here, at any rate, was an obligation I couldn't dodge.
It would appear that when a woman writes a book, the action sets up an extraneous vibration. Something happens that must be accounted for. It is the action that does it, not the product. It is only in very rare, and rather non-literary instances, that the product—Uncle Tom’s Cabin, say, or the Memoirs of Harriet Wilson—is the jarring note. It would also appear that this extraneous vibration may be differently received and differently resounded. Some surfaces mute it. Off others, it is violently resonated. It is also subject to the influence of climate, the climate of popular opinion. In a fine dry climate the dissonance caused by a woman writing a book has much less intensity than in a damp foggy one. Overriding these variations due to surface and climate is the fact that the volume increases with the mass—as summarised in Macheath’s Law:

One wife is too much for most husbands to hear
But two at a time sure no mortal can bear.
Finally, it would appear that the vibration is not set up until a woman seizes a pen. She may invent, but she may not write down.

Macheath’s Law explains why the early women writers caused so little alarm. They only went off one at a time. If a great lady such as Marie de France chose to give her leisure to letters instead of embroidery, this was merely a demonstration that society could afford such luxuries—an example of what Veblen defined as Conspicuous Waste. No one went unfed or unclothed for it. Nor could she be held guilty of setting a bad example to other women, since so few women were in a position to follow it. So things went on, with now and then a literate woman making a little squeak with her pen, while the other women added a few more lines to Mother Goose (about that authorship, I think there can be no dispute). It was not till the retreat from the Renaissance that the extraneous vibration was heard as so very jarring. By then, many women had learned to read and write, so a literate woman was no longer an ornament to society. Kept in bounds, she had her uses. She could keep the account books and transcribe recipes for horse pills. But she must be kept within bounds: she must subserve. When Teresa of Avila wrote her autobiography, she said in a preface that it had been written with leave, and “in accordance with my confessor’s command”. True, she immediately added, “The Lord himself, I know, has long wished it to be written”—a sentiment felt by most creative writers, I believe; but the woman and the Lord had to wait for permission.

The French have always allowed a place to Conspicuous Waste, it is one of the things they excel at; and Mme de La Fayette rewarded this tolerance by giving France the first psychological novel, La Princesse de Clèves. But Molière was probably a surer mouthpiece of public opinion when he made a game of literary ladies. It is more damning to be shown as absurd than to be denounced as scandalous. It is more damning still to be thought old-fashioned. Margaret, Countess of Newcastle, was derided not only as a figure of fun but as a figure out of the lumber-room. (Much the same condemnation fell on Lady Murasaki, a most eminent woman writer, whose nickname in the Japanese court of the early eleventh century was Dame Annals.) In eighteenth-century England, a woman of fashion wrote at her peril (I doubt if Pope would have laid so much stress on Lady Mary Wortley-
Montagu being dirty if she had not been inky.) A woman who wrote for publication—by then, a fair number did—sank in the social scale. If she wrote fiction, she was a demirep. If she wrote as a scholar, she was a dowdy. However, as men of letters had also gone down in the world, writing women gained more than they lost. They gained companionship, they approached a possibility of being judged on their merits by writers of the opposite sex.

Too much has been made of Dr. Johnson’s opinion of women preachers, not enough of the fact that Mrs Chapone and Elizabeth Carter contributed to The Rambler, nor of his goodwill towards Mrs Lennox, and the hot apple pie he stuck with bay leaves in her honour. In the case of Fanny Burney, Johnson showed more than goodwill. He showed courage. Fanny Burney was his friend’s daughter, and a virgin. And Fanny Burney had written a novel. Not even a romance. A novel.

The speed with which women possess themselves of an advantage is something astonishing. Such quantities of virtuous women turned to novel-writing that Jane Austen was able to pick and choose among them, to laugh at Ann Radcliffe and Mary Brunton, to admire Miss Edgeworth. It was an Indian summer, the last glow of the Age of Reason. Jane Austen could inscribe her title-page with that majestic, By a Lady. The Brontë sisters, not so. They were born too late. The barometer had fallen, the skies had darkened. They grew up in an age which had decided that women had an innate moral superiority. As almost everything was a menace to this innate moral superiority, it was necessary that women should be protected, protected from men, protected from life, protected from being talked about, protected from Euclid—Mary Somerville the mathematician has recorded how hard put to it she was to expose herself to Euclid—protected above all from those dangerous articles, themselves. You couldn’t have women dashing their pens into inkpots and writing as if they knew about life and had something to say about it. Determined to write and to be judged on the merit of their writing, women put on men’s names: Aurore Dudevant became George Sand, and Mary Ann Evans, George Eliot, and Emily Brontë consented to the ambiguity of Ellis Bell.

I think I can now venture a positive assertion about women as writers. It is a distinguishing assertion; if I were talking about Men as Writers I could not make it. Women as writers are obstinate and sly.

I deliberately make this assertion in the present tense. Though a woman writing today is not hampered by an attribution of innate moral superiority, she has to reckon with an attribution of innate physical superiority; and this, too, can be cumbersome. There is, for instance, bi-location. It is well known that a woman can be in two places at once; at her desk and at her washing-machine. She can practise a mental bi-location also, pinning down some slippery adverb while saying aloud, “No, not Hobbs, Nokes. And the address is 17 Dalmeny Crescent.” Her mind is so extensive that it can simultaneously follow a train of thought, remember what it was she had to tell the electrician, answer the telephone, keep an eye on the time, and not forget about the potatoes. Obstinacy and slyness still have their uses, although they are not literary qualities.
But I have sometimes wondered if women are literary at all. It is not a thing which is strenuously required of them, and perhaps, finding something not required of them, they thank God and do no more about it. They write. They dive into writing like ducks into water. One would almost think it came naturally to them—at any rate as naturally as plain sewing.

Here is a non-literary woman writing in the nineteenth century. She wrote under her own name, for her sex was already notorious:

There were three separate registers kept at Scutari. First, the Adjutant's daily Head-Roll of soldiers' burials, on which it may be presumed that no one was entered who was not buried, although it is possible that some may have been buried who were not entered.

Second, the Medical Officer's Return, in regard to which it is quite certain that hundreds of men were buried who never appeared upon it.

Third, the return made in the Orderly Room, which is only remarkable as giving a totally different account of the deaths from either of the others.

I should like to think that Florence Nightingale's work is not yet done. If it could be set as a model before those who write official reports, the publications of Her Majesty's Stationery Office might grow much leaner, much time and money might be saved. But this is by the way.

Here is another, writing in the seventeenth century:

Take a pint of cream, three spoonfuls of rice flour, the whites of three eggs well beaten, and four spoonfuls of fine sugar. Stir these well into your cream cold; then take a few blanched almonds and beat them in a mortar with two spoonfuls of water, then strain them into your cream and boil it till it comes from the skillet. Then take it up and put in two spoonfuls of sack, and wet your cups with sack and put in your custard, and let it stand till it is cold.

From a cookery book, as you will have realised—but a piece of tight, clear, consecutive writing.

Here is a woman writing from Norwich in July 1453:

And as for tidings, Philip Berney is passed to God on Monday last past with the greatest pain that ever I saw a man; and on Tuesday Sir John Heveningham went to his church and heard three masses and came home never merrier; and said to his wife that he would go say a little devotion in his garden and then dine; and forthwith he felt a fainting in his leg and slid down. This was at nine of the clock and he was dead ere noon.

Here is another Norfolk woman, writing, or possibly dictating, towards the close of the previous century:

And after this I saw God in a Point—that is to say, in my understanding; by which I saw he is in all things. I beheld and considered, seeing and knowing in sight, with a soft dread, and thought: What is sin?
I really have not cheated over these examples. The two notable women, the two women of no note, I chose them almost at random, and went to their writings to see what I would find. I found them alike in making themselves clear.

As far as I know, there is only one certain method of making things clear, and that is, to have plainly in mind what one wishes to say. When the unequivocal statement matches itself to the predetermined thought and the creative impulse sets fire to them, the quality we call immediacy results. Immediacy has borne other names, it has even been called inspiration—though I think that is too large a term for it. But immediacy has this in common with inspiration, that where it is present the author becomes absent. The writing is no longer propelled by the author's anxious hand, the reader is no longer conscious of the author's chaperoning presence. Here is an example; it is a poem by Frances Cornford:

The Cypriot woman, as she closed her dress,
Smiled at the baby on her broad-lapped knee,
Beautiful in calm voluptuousness
Like a slow sea.

One does not feel that the woman has been written about. She is there.

Women as writers seem to be remarkably adept at vanishing out of their writing so that the quality of immediacy replaces them. Immediacy is the word in La Princess de Clèves, that masterpiece of emotion laced up in the tight embroidered bodice of court dress. Madame de Cleves's heart is laid open before us, and we hang over it; not even pity is allowed to intervene between us and the demonstration. Immediacy is the word when Jane Austen keeps a bookful of rather undistinguished characters not only all alive at once but all aware of each other's existence. In Wuthering Heights immediacy makes a bookful of almost incredible characters fastened into a maddeningly entangled plot seem natural and inevitable, as if it were something familiar to us because of a dream. When the goblins fasten on Lizzie and press the fruit against her clenched teeth; when Orlando finds the man in Mrs Stewkley's room, the man who turned his pen in his fingers, this way and that; and gazed and mused; and then, very quickly, wrote half a dozen lines—and no more need be said, with our own eyes we have looked on William Shakespeare; when Murasaki's Genji takes Yugao to the deserted house where the ghost steals her away from him; when, at the close of Colette's La Chatte, the girl looks back from the turn of the avenue and sees the cat keeping a mistrustful eye on her departure and the young man playing, defiantly as a cat, with the first-fallen chestnuts, it is not the writer one is conscious of. One is conscious of a happening, of something taking place under one's very nose. As for Sappho, I cannot speak. She rises in my mind like a beautiful distant island, but I cannot set foot on her because I haven't learned Greek. But I am assured that immediacy is the word for Sappho.

While all these splendid examples were rushing into my mind, I realised that a great many examples which could not be called splendid were accompany-
ing them: that when the gust of wind flutters the hangings and extinguishes the solitary taper and Mrs Radcliffe’s heroine is left in darkness, it is a darkness that can be felt; that in George Sand’s writing, for all its exploitation and rhetoric, George Sand may suddenly be replaced by the first frost prowling under cover of night through an autumn garden; that the short stories of Mary Wilkins, a New England writer of the last century whose characters appear to be made out of lettuce, can remain in one’s mind and call one back to a re-reading because one remembers a queer brilliant verisimilitude, the lighting of immediacy.

There is, of course, George Eliot. She makes herself admirably clear and her mind, such a fine capacious mind, too, is stored with things she wishes to say; but in her case, immediacy does not result. We remember scenes and characters, but do they ever haunt us? She dissects a heart, but something intervenes between us and the demonstration—the lecturer’s little wand. There is a class of women writers, praiseworthily combining fiction with edification, and among them is Mrs Sherwood of The Fairchild Family, Mrs Gatty of Parables from Nature, Mrs Trimmer... it seems to me that George Eliot insisted upon being a superlative Mrs Trimmer.

Still, George Eliot apart—a considerable apart—I think one might claim that this quality of immediacy, though common to either sex, is proportionately of more frequent occurrence in the work of women writers. And though it is impossible in judging the finished product to pronounce on which pages were achieved with effort, which came easily, the fact that even quite mediocre women writers will sometimes wear this precious jewel in their heads seems to indicate that it is easier for a woman to make herself air and vanish off her pages than it is for a man, with his heavier equipment of learning and self-consciousness. Perhaps this is really so, and for a reason. Suppose, for instance, that there was a palace, which you could only know from outside. Sometimes you heard music playing within, and the corks popping, and sometimes splendid figures came to an open window and spoke a few words in a solemn chanting voice; and from time to time you met someone who had actually been inside, and was carrying away under his arm—it was always a man—a lute or a casket or the leg of a turkey. And then one day you discovered that you could climb into this palace by the pantry window. In the excitement of the moment you wouldn’t wait; you wouldn’t go home to smooth your hair or borrow your grandmother’s garnets or consult the Book of Etiquette. Even at the risk of being turned out by the butler, rebuked by the chaplin, laughed at by the rightful guests, you’d climb in.

In something of the same way, women have entered literature—breathless, unequipped, and with nothing but their wits to trust to. A few minutes ago, or a few centuries ago, they were writing a letter about an apoplexy, or a recipe for custard. Now they are inside the palace, writing with great clearness what they have in mind to say—for that is all they know about it, no one has groomed them for a literary career—writing on the kitchen table, like Emily Brontë, or on the washstand, like Christina Rossetti, writing in the attic, like George Sand, or in the family parlour, protected by a squeaking door from being discovered at it, like Jane Austen, writing away for all they are worth, and seldom blotting a line.
Do you see what we are coming to?—I have put in several quotations to prepare you for it. We are coming to those other writers who have got into literature by the pantry window, and who have left the most illustrious footprints on the windowsill. It is a dizzying conclusion, but it must be faced. Women, entering literature, entered it on the same footing as William Shakespeare.

So if women writers have what might appear an unfairly large share of the quality of immediacy which is sometimes called inspiration—and in the case of Shakespeare we all agree to call it so—it is not, after all, original in them—like sin. It derives from their circumstances, not from their sex. It is interesting to see what other qualities, also deriving from circumstance, the circumstance of entering literature by the pantry window, they share with Shakespeare. I can think of several. One is their conviction that women have legs of their own, and can move about of their own volition, and give as good as they get. Lady Macbeth, and Beatrice, and Helena in All's Well, could almost be taken for women writers' heroines, they are so free and uninhibited, and ready to jump over stiles and appear in the drawing-room with muddy stockings, like Lizzie Bennet.

Another pantry window trait is the kind of workaday democracy, an ease and appreciativeness in low company. It is extremely rare to find the conventional comic servant or comic countryman in books by women. A convention is pis-aller, a stop-gap where experience is lacking. A woman has to be most exceptionally secluded if she never goes to her own back door, or is not on visiting terms with people poorer than herself. I have said before—but as the remark has only appeared in Russian I can decently repeat myself—Emily Brontë was fortunate in being the daughter of a clergyman, because the daughter of a clergyman, with her duty of parish visiting, has wonderful opportunities to become acquainted with human passions and what they can lead to. Another trait in common is a willing ear for the native tongue, for turns of phrase used by carpenters, gardeners, sailors, milliners, tinkers, old nurses, and that oldest nurse of all, ballad and folklore. Just as Mme de Sévigné was always improving her French by picking up words and idioms from her tenants at Les Rochers, Colette listened to every trade, every walk in life, and kept dictionaries of professional terms beside her desk—while Edith Sitwell's poetry reaches back through centuries of English poetical idiom to Nuts in May and Mother Goose.

These traits, as you will have noticed, are technical assets. They affect presentation, not content. Their absence may be deadening, but their presence does not make their possessor any more eligible to be compared with Shakespeare. The resemblance is in the circumstances. Women writers have shared his advantage of starting with no literary advantages. No butlers were waiting just inside the front door to receive their invitation cards and show them in. Perhaps the advantage is not wholly advantageous; but circumstances do alter cases. It was not very surprising that young Mr Shelley should turn to writing; it was surprising that young Mr Keats did, and his poetry reflects his surprise, his elation. It is the poetry of a young man surprised by joy. So is the poetry of John Clare. But though the male entrants by the pantry window possess the quality of immediacy just as women writers do, are at ease in low company and in the
byways of their native language, they do not employ these advantages with the same fluency—I hesitate to use the word exploit; I will say, they are not so much obliged to them. I see a possible explanation for this, which I will come to presently.

But first I must come to the present day, when women, one might think, have so well established themselves as writers that the extraneous vibration must be hushed, and the pantry window supplanted as an entrance to literature by the Tradesman’s Door. No woman writer should despise the Tradesman’s Door. It is a very respectable entrance, the path to it was first trod by Mrs Aphra Behn, and many women have trodden it since, creditably and contentedly too. I should be failing my title if I did not remind you that we now have women newspaper reporters working in such vexed places as Cyprus—a signal advance. Yet, when we use the term backwriter, we still feel that it must apply to a man; that a woman is once and for always an amateur. In the same spirit, if she happens to make a great deal of money by a book, well and good, it is one of those lucky accidents that happen from time to time, no one is the worse for it, and she is unexpectedly the better. But if she earns her living by her pen, we are not so ready to accept the idea. If we are polite enough to dissemble our feelings we say that it is a pity that with so much talent she should be reduced to this sort of thing. If we are candid and pure-souled, we say that it’s outrageous and that she ought to become a hospital nurse. If she marries—again it’s a pity—a polite pity that she will have to give up her writing. So much pity is ominous.

And in fact, the vibration may start up at any moment. Macheath’s Law still holds; not for numbers, perhaps, but for area. It is admitted that women may write very nearly what they please, just as, within limits, they may do what they please: though I suppose it will be a long time before they can enter the priesthood or report football matches on the BBC. But this liberty is zoned. It applies to women belonging to the middle classes. You know those shiny papers one reads in waiting-rooms, and how, every week, they show a photograph of a woman of the upper classes, with a little notice underneath. One has just come out. One has recently married. One wins prizes with her Shetland ponies, another has a charming pair of twins, another is an MFH. But despite Edith Sitwell and Dorothy Wellesley, one does not expect to read below the photograph that the lady is a poet. Take it a step higher. Suppose that a royal princess would not tear herself from the third act of her tragedy in order to open a play-centre. People would be gravely put out, especially the man who had been building the play-centre, men who have taught their wives to know their place, and who expect princesses to be equally dutiful.

A working-class woman may be as gifted as all the women writers I have spoken of today, all rolled into one; but it is no part of her duty to write a masterpiece. Her brain may be teeming, but it is not the fertility of her brain she must attend to, permissible citizens is what her country expects of her, not imperishable Falstaffs and Don Quixotes. The Lord himself may long have wished for her books to be written; but leave has yet to be granted. Apart from one or two grandees like Mme de La Fayette, women writers have come from the middle
class, and their writing carries a heritage of middle-class virtues; good taste, prudence, acceptance of limitations, compliance with standards, and that typically middle-class merit of making the most of what one’s got—in other words, that too-conscious employment of advantages which I mentioned a few minutes ago, and which one does not observe in Clare, or Burns, or Bunyan. So when we consider women as writers, we must bear in mind that we have not very much to go on, and that it is too early to assess what they may be capable of. It may well be that the half has not yet been told us: that unbridled masterpieces, daring innovations, epics, tragedies, works of genial impropriety—all the things that so far women have signally failed to produce—have been socially, not sexually, debarred; that at this moment a Joan Milton or a Françoise Rabelais may have left the washing unironed and the stew uncare for because she can’t wait to begin.

Cottage Mantleshelf

On the mantleshelf love and beauty are housed together. There are the two black vases painted with pink roses, And the two dogs carrying baskets of flowers in their jaws. There are the two fans stencilled with characters from Japan, The ruby glass urns each holding a sprig of heather, And the two black velvet cats with bead eyes, pink noses, and white cotton claws.

All these things on the mantleshelf are beautiful and are married: The two black vases throb with their sympathetic pink roses, The puss thinks only of her tom and the dog of his bitch. On the one fan a girl is coquetting and on the other a man, Out of the same vein of fancy the urns were quarried, Even the sprigs of heather have been dried so long you can’t tell ‘tother from which.

But amid this love and beauty are two uncomely whose sorrows Isled in several celibacy can never, never be mated, One of them being but for use and the other useful no more. With a stern voice rocking its way through time the alarm clock Confronts with a pallid face the billowing to-morrows And turns its back on the enlarged photograph of young Osbert who died at the war.

Against the crumpled cloth where the photographer’s fancy Has twined with roses the grand balustrade he poses,
His hands hang limp from the khaki sleeves and his legs are bent.
His enormous ears are pricked and tense as a startled hare’s,
He smiles—and his beseeching swagger is that of a nancy,
And plain to see on the picture is death’s indifferent rubber stamp of assent.

As though through gathering mist he stares out through the photo’s Discolouring, where the lamp throws its pink-shaded echo of roses
On the table laid for supper with cheese and pickles and tea.
The rose-light falls on his kin who sit there with a whole skin,
It illumines through England the cottage homes where just such ex-voto
Are preserved on their mantleshelves by the living in token that they are not as he.

Uncomely and unespoused amid the espousals of beauty.
The cats with their plighted noses, the vases pledging their roses,
The scapegoat of the mantleshelf he stands and may not even cleave
To the other unpaired heart that beats beside him and apart;
For the pale-faced clock has heard, as he did, the voice of duty
And disowns him whom time has disowned, whom age cannot succour nor the years reprieve.


**Bluebeard’s Daughter**

Every child can tell of his ominous pigmentation, of his ruthless temper, of the fate of his wives and of his own fate, no less bloody than theirs; but—unless it be here and there a Director of Oriental Studies—no one now remembers that Bluebeard had a daughter. Amid so much that is wild and shocking this gentler trait of his character has been overlooked. Perhaps, rather than spoil the symmetry of a bad husband by an admission that he was a good father, historians have suppressed her. I have heard her very existence denied, on the grounds that none of Bluebeard’s wives lived long enough to bear him a child. This shows what it is to give a dog a bad name. To his third wife, the mother of Djamileh, Bluebeard was most tenderly devoted, and no shadow of suspicion rested upon her quite natural death in childbed.

From the moment of her birth Djamileh became the apple of Bluebeard’s eye. His messengers ransacked Georgia and Circassia to find wet-nurses of unimpeachable health, beauty, and virtue; her infant limbs were washed in nothing but rosewater, and swaddled in Chinese silks. She cut her teeth upon a cabochon emerald engraved with propitious mottoes, and all the nursery ves-
sels, mugs, platters, ewers, basins, and chamber-pots were of white jade. Never was there a more adoring and conscientious father than Bluebeard, and I have sometimes thought that the career of this much-widowed man was inevitably determined by his anxiety to find for Djamileh an ideal stepmother.

Djamileh’s childhood was happy, for none of the stepmothers lasted long enough to outwear their good intentions, and every evening, whatever his occupations during the day, Bluebeard came to the nursery for an hour’s romp. But three days before her ninth birthday Djamileh was told that her father was dead; and while she was still weeping for her loss she was made to weep even more bitterly by the statement that he was a bad man and that she must not cry for him. Dressed in crape, with the Bluebeard diamonds sparkling like angry tears beneath her veils, and wearing a bandage on her wrist, Fatima came to Djamileh’s pavilion and paid off the nurses and governesses. With her came Aunt Ann, and a strange young man whom she was told to call Uncle Selim; and while the nurses lamented and packed and the governesses sulked, swooned, and clapped their hands for sherbet, Djamileh listened to this trio disputing as to what should be done with her.

“For she can’t stay here alone,” said Fatima. “And nothing will induce me to spend another night under this odious roof.”

“Why not send her to school?”

“Or to the Christians?” suggested Selim.

“Perhaps there is some provision for her in the will?”

“Will! Don’t tell me that such a monster could make a will, a valid will. Besides, he never made one.”

Fatima stamped her foot, and the diamond necklace sidled on her stormy bosom. Still disputing, they left the room.

That afternoon all the silk carpets and embroidered hangings, all the golden dishes and rock-crystal wine-coolers, together with the family jewels and Bluebeard’s unique collection of the Persian erotic poets, were packed up and sent by camel to Selim’s residence in Teheran. Thither travelled also Fatima, Ann, Selim, and Djamileh, together with a few selected slaves, Fatima in one litter with Selim riding at her side, doing his best to look stately but not altogether succeeding, since his mount was too big for him, Ann and Djamileh in the other. During the journey Ann said little, for she was engaged in ticking off entries in a large scroll. But once or twice she told Djamileh not to fidget, and to thank her stars that she had kind friends who would provide for her.

As it happened, Djamileh was perfectly well provided for. Bluebeard had made an exemplary and flawless will by which he left all his property to his only daughter and named his solicitor as her guardian until she should marry. No will can please everybody; and there was considerable heartburning when Badruddin removed Djamileh and her belongings from the care of Fatima, Ann, and Selim, persisting to the last filigree egg-cup in his thanks for their kind offices toward the heiress and her inheritance.

Badruddin was a bachelor, and grew remarkably fine jasmines. Every evening when he came home from his office he filled a green watering pot and went
to see how they had passed the day. In the latticed garden the jasmine bush awaited him like a dumb and exceptionally charming wife. Now he often found Djamileh sitting beneath the bush, pale and silent, as though, in response to being watered so carefully, the jasmine had borne him a daughter.

It would have been well for Djamileh if she had owed her being to such an innocent parentage. But she was Bluebeard’s daughter, and all the girl-babies of the neighbourhood cried in terror at her father’s name. What was more, the poor girl could not look at herself in the mirror without being reminded of her disgrace. For she had inherited her father’s colouring. Her hair was a deep butcher’s blue, her eyebrows and eyelashes were blue also. Her complexion was clear and pale, and if some sally of laughter brought a glow to her cheek it was of the usual pink, but the sinister parental pigmentation reasserted itself on her lips, which were deep purple as though stained with eating mulberries; and the inside of her mouth and her tongue were dusky blue like a well-bred chow-dog’s. For the rest she was like any other woman, and when she pricked her finger the blood ran scarlet.

Looks so much out of the common, if carried off with sufficient assurance, might be an asset to a modern miss. In Djamileh’s time taste was more classical. Blue hair and purple lips, however come by, would have been a serious handicap for any young woman—how much more so, then, for her, in whom they were not only regrettable but scandalous. It was impossible for Bluebeard’s badged daughter to be like other girls of her age. The purple mouth seldom smiled; the blue hair, severely braided by day, was often at night wetted with her tears. She might, indeed, have dyed it. But filial devotion forbade. Whatever his faults, Bluebeard had been a good father.

Djamileh had a great deal of proper feeling; it grieved her to think of her father’s crimes. But she had also a good deal of natural partiality, and disliked Fatima; and this led her to try to find excuses for his behaviour. No doubt it was wrong, very wrong, to murder so many wives; but Badruddin seemed to think that it was almost as wrong to have married them, at any rate to have married so many of them. Experience, he said, should have taught the deceased that female curiosity is insatiatable; it was foolish to go on hoping to find a woman without curiosity. Speaking with gravity, he conjured his ward to struggle, as far as in her lay, with this failing, so natural in her own sex, so displeasing to the other.

Djamileh fastened upon his words. To mark her reprobation of curiosity, the fault which had teased on her father to his ruin, she resolved never to be in the least curious herself. And for three weeks she did not ask a single question. At the end of the third week she fell into a violent fever, and Badruddin, who had been growing more and more disquieted by what appeared to him to be a protracted fit of sulks, sent for a doctoress. The doctoress was baffled by the fever, but did not admit it. What the patient needed, she said, was light but distracting conversation. Mentioning in the course of her chat that she had discovered from the eunuch that the packing-case in the lobby contained a new garden hose, the doctoress had the pleasure of seeing Djamileh make an instant recovery from her fever. Congratulating herself on her skill and on her fee, the
old dame went off, leaving Djamileh to realize that it was not enough to refrain from asking questions, some more radical method of combating curiosity must be found. And so when Badruddin, shortly after her recovery, asked her in a laughing way how she would like a husband, she replied seriously that she would prefer a public-school education.

This was not possible. But the indulgent solicitor did what he could to satisfy this odd whim, and Djamileh made such good use of her opportunities that by the time she was fifteen she had spoiled her handwriting, forgotten how to speak French, lost all of her former interest in botany, and asked only the most unspeculative questions. Badruddin was displeased. He sighed to think that the intellectual Bluebeard’s child should have grown up so dull-witted, and spent more and more time in the company of his jasmines. Possibly, even, he consulted them, for though they were silent they could be expressive. In any case, after a month or so of inquiries, interviews, and drawing up treaties, he told Djamileh that, acting under her father’s will, he had made arrangements for her marriage.

Djamileh was sufficiently startled to ask quite a number of questions, and Badruddin congratulated himself on the aptness of his prescription. His choice had fallen upon Prince Kayel Oumarah, a young man of good birth, good looks, and pleasant character, but not very well-to-do. The prince’s relations were prepared to overlook Djamileh’s origin in consideration of her fortune, which was enormous, and Kayel, who was of a rather sentimental turn of mind, felt that it was an act of chivalry to marry a young girl whom other young men might scorn for what was no fault of hers, loved her already for being so much obliged to him, and wrote several ghazals expressing a preference for blue hair.

“What wouldn’t I do, what wouldn’t I do,
To get at that hair of heavenly blue?”

(the original Persian is, of course, more elegant) sang Kayel under her window. Djamileh thought this harping on her hair not in the best of taste, more especially since Kayel had a robust voice and the whole street might hear him. But it was flattering to have poems written about her (she herself had no turn for poetry), and when she peeped through the lattice she thought that he had a good figure and swayed to and fro with a great deal of feeling. Passion and a good figure can atone for much; and perhaps when they were man and wife he would leave off making personal remarks.

After a formal introduction, during which Djamileh offered Kayel symbolical sweetmeats and in her confusion ate most of them herself, the young couple were married. And shortly thereafter they left town for the Castle of Shady Transports, the late Bluebeard’s country house.

Djamileh had not set eyes on Shady Transports since she was carried away from it in the same litter as Aunt Ann and the inventory. It had been in the charge of a caretaker ever since. But before the wedding Badruddin had spent a few days at the village inn, and under his superintendence the roof had been mended, the gardens trimmed up, all the floors very carefully scrubbed, and a
considerable quantity of female attire burned in the stable yard. There was no
look of former tragedy about the place when Djamileh and Kayel arrived. The
fountain plashed innocently in the forecourt, all the most appropriate flowers in
the language of love were bedded out in the parterre, a troop of new slaves, very
young and handsomely dressed, stood bowing on either side of the door, and
seated on cushions in stiff attitudes of expectation Maya and Moghreb, Djamileh’s favourite dolls, held out their jointed arms in welcome.

Tears came into her eyes at this token of Badruddin’s understanding heart.
She picked up her old friends and kissed first one and then the other, begging
their pardon for the long years in which they had suffered neglect. She thought
they must have pined, for certainly they weighed much less than of old. Then
she recollected that she was grown up, and had a husband.

At the moment he was not to be seen. Still clasping Maya and Moghreb,
she went in search of him, and found him in the armoury, standing lost in
admiration before a display of swords, daggers, and cutlasses. Djamileh remem-
bered how, as a child, she had been held up to admire, and warned not to touch.

“That one comes from Turkestan,” she said. “My father could cut off a
man’s head with it at a single blow.”

Kayel pulled the blade a little way from the sheath. It was speckled with
rust, and the edge was blunted.

“We must have them cleaned up,” he said. “It’s a pity to let them get like
this, for I’ve never seen a finer collection.”

“He had a splendid collection of poets, too,” said Djamileh. “I was too
young to read them then, of course, but now that I am married to a poet myself I
shall read them all.”

“What a various-minded man!” exclaimed Kayel as he followed her to the
library.

It is always a pleasure to explore a fine old rambling country house. Many
people whose immediate thoughts would keep them tediously awake slide into
a dream by fancying that such a house has—no exact matter how—come into
their possession. In fancy they visit it for the first time, they wander from room
to room, trying each bed in turn, pulling out the books, opening Indian boxes,
meeting themselves in mirrors. . . . All is new to them, and all is theirs.

For Kayel and Djamileh this charming delusion was a matter of fact.
Djamileh indeed declared that she remembered Shady Transports from the days
of her childhood, and was always sure that she knew what was round the next
corner; but really her recollections were so fragmentary that except for the senti-
ment of the thing she might have been exploring her old home for the first time.
As for Kayel, who had spent most of his life in furnished lodgings, the comfort
and spaciousness of his wife’s palace impressed him even more than he was
prepared to admit. Exclaiming with delight, the young couple ransacked the
house, or wandered arm in arm through the grounds, discovering fishponds,
icehouses, classical grottoes, and rustic bridges. The gardeners heard their laug-
ter among the blossoming thickets, or traced where they had sat by the quantity
of cherry-stones.
At last a day came when it seemed that Shady Transports had yielded up to them all its secrets. A sharp thunderstorm had broken up the fine weather. The rain was still falling, and Kayel and Djamileh sat in the western parlour playing chess like an old married couple. The rain had cooled the air, indeed it was quite chilly; and Kayel, who was getting the worst of the game, complained of a draught that blew on his back and distracted him.

"There can’t really be a draught, my falcon," objected Djamileh, "for draughts don’t blow out of solid walls, and there is only a wall behind you."

"There is a draught," persisted he. "I take your pawn. No, wait a moment, I’m not sure that I do. How can I possibly play chess in a whirlwind?"

"Change places," said his wife, "and I’ll turn the board."

They did so and continued the game. It was now Djamileh’s move; and as she sat gazing at the pieces Kayel fell to studying her intent and unobservant countenance. She was certainly quite pretty, very pretty even, in spite of her colouring. Marriage had improved her, thought he. A large portrait of Bluebeard hung on the wall behind her. Kayel’s glance went from living daughter to painted sire, comparing the two physiognomies. Was there a likeness—apart, of course, from the blue hair? Djamileh was said to be the image of her mother; certainly the rather foxlike mask before him, the narrow eyes and pointed chin, bore no resemblance to the prominent eyes and heavy jowl of the portrait. Yet there was a something . . . the pouting lower lip, perhaps, emphasized now by her considering expression. Kayel had another look at the portrait.

"Djamileh! There is a draught! I saw the hangings move." He jumped up and pulled them aside. "What did I say?" he inquired triumphantly.

"Oh! Another surprise! Oh, haven’t I a lovely Jack-in-the-Box house?"

The silken hangings had concealed a massive stone archway, closed by a green baize door.

Kayel nipped his wife’s ear affectionately. "You who remember everything so perfectly—what’s behind that door?"

"Rose-petal conserve," she replied. "I have just remembered how it used to be brought out from the cupboard when I was good."

"I don’t believe it. I don’t believe there’s a cupboard, I don’t believe you were ever good."

"Open it and see."

Beyond the baize door a winding stair led into a small gallery or corridor, on one side of which were windows looking into the park, on the other, doors. It was filled with a green and moving light reflected from the wet foliage outside. They turned to each other with rapture. A secret passage—five doors in a row, five new rooms waiting to be explored! With a dramatic gesture Kayel threw open the first door. A small dark closet was revealed, perfectly empty. A trifle dashed, they opened the next door. Another closet, small, dark, and empty. The third door revealed a third closet, the exact replica of the first and second.

Djamilech began to laugh at her husband’s crestfallen air.

"In my day," she said, "all these cupboards were full of rose-petal conserve. So now you see how good I was."
Kayel opened the fourth door.

He was a solemn young man, but now he began to laugh also. Four empty closets, one after another, seemed to these amiable young people the height of humour. They laughed so loudly that they did not hear a low peal of thunder, the last word of the retreating storm. A dove who had her nest in the lime tree outside the window was startled by their laughter or by the thunder; she flew away, looking pale and unreal against the slate-coloured sky. Her flight stirred the branches, which shook off their raindrops, spattering them against the casement.

"Now for the fifth door," said Kayel.

But the fifth door was locked.

"Djamileh, dear, run and ask the steward for the keys. But don't mention which door we want unfastened. Slaves talk so, they are always imagining mysteries."

"I am rather tired of empty cupboards, darling. Shall we leave this one for the present? At any rate till after tea? So much emptiness has made me very hungry, I really need my tea."

"Djamileh, fetch the keys."

Djamileh was an obedient wife, but she was also a prudent one. When she had found the bunch of keys she looked carefully over those which were unlabelled. They were many, and of all shapes and sizes; but at last she found the key she had been looking for and which she had dreaded to find. It was a small key, made of gold and finely arabesqued; and on it there was a small dark stain that might have been a bloodstain.

She slipped it off the ring and hid it in her dress.

Returning to the gallery, she was rather unpleasantly struck by Kayel's expression. She could never have believed that his open countenance could wear such a look of cupidity or that his eyes could become so beady. Hearing her step, he started violently, as though roused from profound absorption.

"There you are! What an age you have been—darling! Let's see now. Icehouse, Stillroom, Butler's Pantry, Winecellar, Family Vault . . . I wonder if this is it?"

He tried key after key, but none of them fitted. He tried them all over again, upside-down or widdershins. But still they did not fit. So then he took out his pocketknife, and tried to pick the lock. This also was useless.

"Eblis take this lock!" he exclaimed. And suddenly losing his temper, he began to kick and batter at the door. As he did so there was a little click; and one of the panels of the door fell open upon a hinge, and disclosed a piece of parchment, framed and glazed, on which was an inscription in ancient Sanskrit characters.

"What the . . . Here, I can't make this out."

Djamileh, who was better educated than her husband in such worthless studies as calligraphy, examined the parchment and read aloud: "CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT."

Against her bosom she felt the little gold key sidle, and she had the unpleas-
ant sensation which country language calls: "The grey goose walking over your grave."

"I think," she said gently, "I think, dear husband, we had better leave this door alone."

Kayel scratched his head and looked at the door.

"Are you sure that's what it means? Perhaps you didn't read it right."

"I am quite sure that is what it means."

"But, Djamileh, I do want to open the door."

"So do I, dear. But under the circumstances we had better not do anything of the sort. The doors in this house are rather queer sometimes. My poor father . . . my poor stepmothers . . ."

"I wonder," mused Kayel, "if we could train a cat to turn the lock and go in first."

"Even if we could, which I doubt, I don't think that would be at all fair to the cat. No, Kayel, I am sure we should agree to leave this door alone."

"It's not that I am in the least inquisitive," said Kayel, "for I am not. But as master of this house I really think it my duty to know what's inside this cupboard. It might be firearms, for instance, or poison, which might get into the wrong hands. One has a certain responsibility, hang it!"

"Yes, of course. But all the same I feel sure we should leave the door alone."

"Besides, I have you to consider, Djamileh. As a husband, you must be my first consideration. Now you may not want to open the door just now; but suppose, later on, when you were going to have a baby, you developed one of those strange yearnings that women at such times are subject to; and suppose it took the form of longing to know what was behind this door. It might be very bad for you, Djamileh, it might imperil your health, besides birth-marking the baby. No! It's too grave a risk. We had much better open the door immediately."

And he began to worry the lock again with his penknife.

"Kayel, please don't. Please don't. I implore you, I have a feeling—"

"Nonsense. Women always have feelings."

"—as though I were going to be sick. In fact, I am sure I am going to be sick."

"Well, run off and be sick, then. No doubt it was the thunderstorm, and all those strawberries."

"I can't run off, Kayel. I don't feel well enough to walk; you must carry me. Kayel!"—she laid her head insistently on his chest—"Kayel! I felt sick this morning, too."

And she laid her limp weight against him so firmly that with a sigh he picked her up and carried her down the corridor.

Laid on the sofa, she still kept a firm hold on his wrist, and groaned whenever he tried to detach himself. At last, making the best of a bad job, he resigned himself, and spent the rest of the day reading aloud to her from the erotic Persian poets. But he did not read with his usual fervour; the lyrics, as he rendered them, might as well have been genealogies. And Djamileh, listening
with closed eyes, debated within herself why Kayel should be so cross. Was it just the locked door? Was it, could it be, that he was displeased by the idea of a baby with Bluebeard blood? This second possibility was highly distressing to her, and she wished, more and more fervently, as she lay on the sofa keeping up a pretense of delicate health and disciplining her healthy appetite to a little bouillon and some plain sherbet, that she had hit upon a pretext with fewer consequences entailed.

It seemed to her that they were probably estranged for ever. So it was a great relief to be awakened in the middle of the night by Kayel's usual affable tones, even though the words were:

"Djamileh, I believe I've got it! All we have to do is to get a stonemason, and a ladder, and knock a hole in the wall. Then we can look in from the outside. No possible harm in that."

All the next day and the day after, Kayel perambulated the west wing of Shady Transports with his stonemasons, directing them where to knock holes in the walls; for it had been explained to the slaves that he intended to bring the house up to date by throwing out a few bow-windows. But not one of these perspectives (the walls of Shady Transports were exceedingly massy) afforded a view into the locked closet. While these operations were going on he insisted that Djamileh should remain at his side. It was essential, he said, that she should appear interested in the improvements, because of the slaves. All this while she was carrying about that key on her person, and debating whether she should throw it away, in case Kayel, by getting possession of it, should endanger his life, or whether she should keep it and use it herself the moment he was safely out of the way.

Jaded in nerves and body, at the close of the second day they had a violent quarrel. It purported to be about the best method of pruning acacias, but while they were hurrying from sarcasm to acrimony, from acrimony to abuse, from abuse to fisticuffs, they were perfectly aware that in truth they were quarrelling as to which of them should first get at that closet.

"Laterals! Laterals!" exclaimed Djamileh. "You know no more of pruning than you know of dressmaking. That's right! Tear out my hair, do!"

"No, thank you." Kayel folded his arms across his chest. "I have no use for blue hair."

Pierced by this taunt, Djamileh burst into tears. The soft-hearted Kayel felt that he had gone too far, and made several handsome apologies for the remark; but it seemed likely that his apologies would be in vain, for Djamileh only came out of her tears to ride off on a high horse.

"No, Kayel," she said, putting aside his hand, and speaking with exasperating nobility and gentleness. "No, no, it is useless, do not let us deceive ourselves any longer. I do not blame you; your feeling is natural and one should never blame people for natural feelings."

"Then why have you been blaming me all this time for a little natural curiosity?"

Djamileh swept on.
“And how could you possibly have felt anything but aversion for one in whose veins so blatantly runs the blood of the Bluebeards, for one whose hair, whose lips, stigmatize her as the child of an unfortunate monster? I do not blame you, Kayel. I blame myself, for fancying you could ever love me. But I will make you the only amends in my power. I will leave you.”

A light quickened in Kayel’s eye. So he thought she would leave him at Shady Transports, did he?

“Tomorrow we will go together to Badruddin. He arranged our marriage, he had better see about our divorce.”

Flushed with temper, glittering with tears, she threw herself into his willing arms. They were still in all the raptures of sentimental and first love, and in the even more enthralling raptures of sentiment and first grief, when they set out for Teheran. Absorbed in gazing into each other’s eyes and wiping away each other’s tears with pink silk handkerchiefs, they did not notice that a drove of stampeding camels was approaching their palanquin; and it was with the greatest surprise and bewilderment that they found themselves tossed over a precipice.

When Djamileh recovered her senses she found herself lying in a narrow green pasture, beside a watercourse. Some fine broad-tailed sheep were cropping the herbage around, and an aged shepherdess was bathing her forehead and slapping her hands.

“How did I come here?” she inquired.

“I really cannot tell you,” answered the shepherdess. “All I know is that about half an hour ago you, and a handsome young man, and a coachman, and a quantity of silk cushions and chicken sandwiches appeared, as it were from heaven, and fell amongst us and our sheep. Perhaps as you are feeling better you would like one of the sandwiches?”

“Where is the young man? He is not dead?”

“Not at all. A little bruised, but nothing worse. He recovered before you, and feeling rather shaken he went off with the shepherds to have a drink at the inn. The coachman went with them.”

Djamileh ate another sandwich, brooding on Kayel’s heartlessness.

“Listen,” she said, raising herself on one elbow. “I have not time to tell you the whole of my history, which is long and complicated with unheard-of misfortunes. Suffice it to say that I am young, beautiful, wealthy, well-born, and accomplished, and the child of doting and distinguished parents. At their death I fell into the hands of an unscrupulous solicitor who, entirely against my will, married me to that young man you have seen. We had not been married for a day before he showed himself a monster of jealousy; and though my conduct has been unsotted as the snow he has continually belaboured me with threats and reproaches, and now has determined to shut me up, for ever, in a hermitage on the Caucasus mountains, inherited from a woman-hating uncle (the whole family are very queer). We were on our way thither when, by the interposition of my good genius, the palanquin overturned, and we arrived among your flocks as we did.”
"Indeed," replied the aged shepherdess. "He said nothing of all that. But I do not doubt it. Men are a cruel and fantastic race. I too have lived a life chequered with many strange adventures and unmerited misfortunes. I was born in India, the child of a virtuous Brahmin and of a mother who had, before my birth, graced the world with eleven daughters, each lovelier than the last. In the opinion of many well-qualified persons, I, the youngest of her children, was even fairer——"

"I can well believe it," said Djamileh. "But, venerable Aunt, my misfortunes compel me to postpone the pleasure of hearing your story until a more suitable moment. It is, as you will see, essential that I should seize this chance of escaping from my tyrant. Here is a purse. I shall be everlastingly obliged if you will conduct me to the nearest livery-stables where I can hire a small chariot and swift horses."

Though bruised and scratched Djamileh was not the worse for her sudden descent into the valley, and following the old shepherdess, who was as nimble as a goat, she scrambled up the precipice, and soon found herself in a hired chariot, driving at full speed towards the Castle of Shady Transports, clutching in her hot hand the key of the locked closet. Her impatience was indescribable, and as for her scruples and her good principles, they had vanished as though they had never been. Whether it was a slight concussion, or pique at hearing that Kayel had left her in order to go off and drink with vulgar shepherds, I do not pretend to say. But in any case, Djamileh had now but one thought, and that was to gratify her curiosity as soon as possible.

Bundling up a pretext of having forgotten her jewelry, she hurried past the house steward and the slaves, refusing refreshment and not listening to a word they said. She ran into the west parlour, threw aside the embroidered hangings, opened the green baize door, flew up the winding stair and along the gallery.

But the door of the fifth closet had been burst open.

It gave upon a sumptuous but dusky vacancy, an underground saloon of great size, walled with mosaics and inadequately lit by seven vast rubies hanging from the ceiling. A flight of marble steps led down to this apartment, and at the foot of the steps lay Kayel, groaning piteously.

"Thank heaven you’ve come! I’ve been here for the last half-hour, shouting at the top of my voice, and not one of those accursed slaves has come near me."

"Oh, Kayel, are you badly hurt?"

"Hurt? I should think I’ve broken every bone in my body, and I know I’ve broken my collar-bone. I had to smash that door in, and it gave suddenly, and I pitched all the way down these steps. My second fall today. Oh!"

As she leaned over him the little golden key, forgotten and useless now, slid from her hand.

"My God, Djamileh! You’ve had that key all this time. And so that was why you came back?"

"Yes, Kayel. I came back to open the door. But you got here before me."

And while that parry still held him she hastened to add:
"We have both behaved so shockingly that I don't think either of us had better reproach the other. So now let us see about your fracture."

Not till the collar-bone was mending nicely; not till the coverlet which Djamileh had begun to knit as she sat by her husband's bedside, since knitting is so soothing to invalids, was nearly finished; not till they had solved the last of the acrostics sent to them by a sympathizing Badruddin, did they mention the affair of the closet.

"How could I have the heart to leave you—you, looking so pale, and so appealing?" said Kayel suddenly.

"And the lies I told about you, Kayel, the moment I came to . . . the things I said, the way I took away your character."

"We must have been mad."

"We were suffering from curiosity. That was all, but it was quite enough."

"How terrible curiosity is, Djamileh! Fiercer than lust, more ruthless than avarice. . . ."

"Insatiable as man-eating tigers. . . ."

"Insistent as that itching-powder one buys at low French fairs. . . . O Djamileh, let us vow never to feel curiosity again!"

"I made that vow long ago. You have seen what good it was."

They meditated, gazing into each other's eyes.

"It seems to me, my husband, that we should be less inquisitive if we had more to do. I think we should give up all our money, live in a village, and work all day in the fields."

"That only shows, my dearest, that you have always lived in a town. The people who work all day in the fields will sit up all night in the hopes of discovering if their neighbour's cat has littered brindled or tortoise-shell kittens."

They continued to interrogate each other's eyes.

"A man through whose garden flowed a violent watercourse," said Djamileh, "complained one day to the stream: 'O Stream, you have washed away my hollyhocks, swept off my artichokes, undermined my banks, flooded my bowling-green, and drowned my youngest son, the garland of my grey head. I wish, O Stream, that you would have the kindness to flow elsewhere.' 'That cannot be,' replied the stream, 'since Allah has bidden me to flow where I do. But if you were to erect a mill on your property, perhaps you would admit that I have my uses.' In other words, Kayel, it seems to me that, since we cannot do away with our curiosity, we had best sublimate it, and take up the study of a science."

"Let it be astronomy," answered Kayel. "Of all sciences, it is the one least likely to intervene in our private life."

To this day, though Bluebeard's daughter is forgotten, the wife of Kayel the astronomer is held in remembrance. It was she whose sympathetic collaboration supported him through his researches into the Saturnian rings, it was she who worked out the mathematical calculations which enabled him to prove that the lost Pleiad would reappear in the year 1963. As time went on, and her grandchildren came clustering round the telescope, Djamileh's blue hair became silver;
but to the day of her death her arched blue brows gave an appearance of alertness to her wrinkled countenance, and her teeth, glistening and perfect as in her girlhood, were shown off to the best advantage by the lining of her mouth, duskily blue as that of a well-bred chow-dog’s.