

I

The Chinese Poets Are Polite

This began in 1938, in what was then Ceylon, in a bungalow halfway up a hill. On occasion, when conditions were right, this house would be shrouded with cool mist, like thin, attenuated rain, and in this way would be made invisible from the plains far below. Around it, green swathes of hillside were covered with lines of tea bushes that stretched out, to disappear into scrub and jungle. Only human effort, patient and untiring, kept the wilderness at bay here. That task was endless, involving the imposition of a sense of urgency that was alien to the wisdom of this place – a negation of old courtesies, of ancient pride. Most people here came from somewhere else: from India, across a brief stretch of ocean, or from a remote source of men and ships, and the capital that was needed to get anything done.

So this made it a place of strangers, uprooted from elsewhere, and all aware that home was a long way away. The idea of home was something you carried somewhere inside you together with an understanding that you would never be fully accepted, even if you happened to be born in this country. And you had ways of compensating for that – by making the place you found yourself in seem as much like home as possible. And you invoked memories of home, and

took comfort from them. For the Scots who worked there in the tea trade, these hills could be anywhere in the Western Highlands of their native land, remembered with longing on lonely, maudlin evenings, toasted at the annual Burns Supper in the panelled dining room of the Club, a landscape of the heart that they did not expect – nor particularly want – others to understand.

The bungalow was typical of its sort, of a style that had been planted, uninvited, across vast swatches of a rambling, already doomed empire. It was essentially British, but there was also something slightly Dutch about it, as the Dutch had been there too and had left their architectural mark in a taste for gables. The dominant feature, though, was the veranda, which was deeper than most, and which ran round three sides of the building, a dark mouth into which windows and corridors opened into shadowy interiors. Planters' chairs, with their swivelling extensions, appeared in clusters at various points on this veranda, allowing sunrise and sunset to be viewed from different vantage points. Beside each chair was a small table consisting of a brass-tray top and carved wooden legs. The brass trays had beaten into them designs of trailing leaves and the occasional helmeted warrior from an ancient epic, or an animal. One had a large and benign Ganesh at its centre, trunk and arms raised in benediction; another had the coiled shape of a king cobra, its hood extended, an exaggerated forked tongue protruding from its mouth.

“That tongue,” Bella’s mother said to her. “That tongue isn’t the dangerous bit, you know. It looks like it, but it’s the fangs you have to watch out for. The tongue is out like that so the cobra can smell. It smells with its tongue, you see.”

She was very young, but they had already read Kipling’s ‘Rikki-Tikki-Tavi’ to her, and the tale of the cobra and the

mongoose had made a deep and unfortunate impression. They were just a bit too high in altitude for cobras, although they were occasionally seen. Kraits were a greater threat, and the pickers were sometimes bitten by these smaller but far more venomous snakes. She had seen a woman carried in from the hillside, her hand red with blood where somebody had cut at the wound to release the venom. "Don't look," her mother had said.

But she had, and she had watched as they bundled the woman into the back of a truck and started the journey to hospital in town.

"Will she die?" she had asked. She knew that her mother lied about death, because she said that nobody ever died, and yet she knew this was not true, as she had seen the funeral processions when somebody died down in the lines where the Tamils lived. And she knew that there were orphans, too, because somebody had pointed one out to her, a small girl who was always seen to be wearing a red dress, the only garment she had, and who was looked after by the woman who took the laundry away.

Now, of course, they said, "Of course not. Of course she won't die. The doctors will make her better." And then the warning. "But always look where you put your feet. Remember that."

The bungalow was a tea-planter's house on an estate called Pitlochry in the hills south of Nuwara Eliya. The name Pitlochry evoked the Scottish connections of the owner, Henry Ferguson, who had renamed the estate after he had purchased it two years before Bella's birth. Henry was a young widower who had come to Colombo as a man not yet forty, and had remarried within months of his arrival. His wife, Virginia, twelve years his junior, was the daughter of a Scottish shipping agent in Colombo. She had been born in

Scotland and had accompanied her parents out to Colombo when she was three, only to be sent back for education at the age of eight. It was not until she was eighteen that she returned to Ceylon, not intending to stay, but she had been immediately besieged by young men looking for a wife. There had been a boyfriend from a wealthy Burgher family, but his wild behaviour soon disqualified him before even his origins had time to be considered. Thereafter there was a succession of boyfriends, suitable and unsuitable, tolerated with grim stoicism by her father until, on her twenty-fifth birthday, he and his wife sat her down and told her that unless she found an appropriate man within a year or so she would be unequivocally on the shelf and would have to return home to train as a teacher. Their shock tactics worked, and when she met Henry, the son of a prosperous Scottish farmer, who had been advised to invest a considerable inheritance in a tea estate, she quickly made up her mind to accept the proposal that she sensed would not be long in arriving.

Henry knew as little about the cultivation of tea as he did about Ceylon itself, but he had been bored in Scotland and wanted a challenge. He arrived in Colombo and negotiated the purchase of an estate. He then engaged a reliable manager, who offered to teach him everything he knew, having been warned that growing and processing tea was an art which only experience could teach. You also had to have the right nose: if you could not pick up the subtle essences of the tea leaves as they were being dried or rolled, then you would forever be at a disadvantage. Quick decisions had to be made as to just when the leaves were ready for the next stage of the process; about just how much fermentation should be allowed; about just what degree of moisture could be tolerated at any particular stage, and in all of these the sense of smell was crucial. But Henry had that, it appeared, and,

with his ear for language, he soon picked up enough Tamil for everyday purposes. That, he found, was the easy part: the workers on the estate were all Tamils, having been brought to the country from India, and their lives were governed by considerations of caste, custom and religion that could have been designed to perplex and defeat the outsider. But Henry was adaptable, and, hedged from the consequences of early mistakes by a combination of humour and Scottish stoicism, he not only survived his first couple of years in business but found that he enjoyed the experience.

Virginia knew that she was not in love with Henry when she married him, but she was sure that she liked him, and that, she thought, should be enough for marriage. And that liking, she felt, could mature into love, through familiarity – as long as one had other things by which to sustain oneself. Her passion in life was reading, and life on a tea estate was ideally suited to the pursuit of that enthusiasm. Like many women of her type and her time, obliged to live in remote locations because of their husbands' occupation, the challenge for Virginia was avoiding lapsing into inertia from sheer boredom. If that were to happen, then all that would be available to her would be gossip and complaint. Reading saved her from that fate, as did her decision to establish what she referred to as a *reading circle* made up of women from neighbouring estates and the wives of the odd colonial official stationed in the vicinity. This group met every three weeks to discuss books sent up to them from the bookseller in Kandy. Their meetings took place in a small pavilion that a previous owner of Pitlochry had built on the edge of the main bungalow garden, just at the point where the land dropped in a steep plunge of several hundred feet to the slopes below. The pavilion projected over the edge of this drop, supported by wooden pillars driven at an angle

into the side of the cliff. This gave it the feeling of being suspended in the air, often above wisps of cloud that floated across the valley down below. Virginia called it the Pavilion in the Clouds, and had the name chiselled into the slab of rock that marked its entrance.

The reading circle was catholic in its tastes. They read Austen, Trollope and Dickens, but also such foreign and modern novels as arrived in Colombo on the mail boat. Tolstoy was popular, as was Stendhal. *Madame Bovary* had divided opinion, as had *Of Human Bondage* and *Sons and Lovers*. "I'm not quite sure where Mr Lawrence is taking us," Virginia had said to her husband. "It's all very unsettling. Do men really think that way?"

Henry smiled. He would read Lawrence one day, he said, but there was no time for him just yet. It was safer, then, to discount what he had to say. "I don't think so," he said. "I'm sure Lawrence exaggerates."

Virginia was determined that Bella would be brought up to appreciate books. She read to her every night, mixing adult reading indiscriminately with children's books. She had a taste for translations of Chinese poetry and would read from *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* even if the subject matter was far above her daughter's head. That did not worry Bella, who liked everything her mother read to her, and who thought of the Chinese poets as being exotic foreign uncles. She had a small family of stuffed dolls, and she named these after them. There was a Li Po and a Po Chü-i, and several others beside. She made a little black hat for one of them and said it was the hat given by Li Chien. Her mother said, "One day the Chinese poets will come and have tea with us. They'll come to the Pavilion in the Clouds. Would you like that?"

“I’ll bake a cake for Li Po,” said Bella, with all the solemnity of her seven years.

“He’d like that. And he might write a poem about it.”

“Would he really? Do you really think so?”

“Of course he would. The Chinese poets are very polite. They always write poems for people who do kind things for them.”

When Bella was eight, her parents engaged a governess, a Miss White, who had been staying with distant relatives on one of the largest estates up-country. She wanted to remain in Ceylon for several years, and few families would entertain the thought of employing a governess, but Bella’s parents saw that engaging Miss White would save them having to send their daughter to the small boarding school at Nuwara Eliya. Miss White was a woman in her late thirties whose father taught at St Andrews University; he was an acknowledged authority, she said, on Victorian literature. She had worked in Calcutta, in the family of one of the Governor’s most senior officials, and had then decided to visit Ceylon. She was punctilious in her time-keeping, insisting on four hours of study in the morning and two in the afternoon. For fifteen minutes each day she spoke to Bella in French.

Miss White was armed. Shortly after her arrival at the estate, she had gone for an evening walk along one of the paths that led from the sorting sheds into a forest area further up the hill. It was a path used by the Tamil workers and their families, and she had felt quite safe at an hour of the day when there were still women using the path as a shortcut to their homes on the staff lines. On this occasion, though, there was a wedding further down the hill, and the path was deserted.

One of the men on the maintenance crew had been fired

for insubordination to the overseers. He had been ordered to clear the room he occupied, but had declined to do so. The labour manager had been called and had promised to attend to the eviction, but failed to do so because it was his cousin who was getting married. The man had spent the afternoon drinking and imagining revenge for what he saw as the unjust treatment meted out to him. A poor head for alcohol had only deepened his smouldering rage, and when he came across Miss White on a remote section of the path he lunged at her blindly, pushing her to the ground and tearing off her blouse.

Miss White had fought back, gouging her assailant with her nails. In the course of the ensuing struggle, she managed to get hold of a small rock and struck him hard on the side of the head. This gave her the opportunity to stagger to her feet and flee headlong down the path to safety.

This experience led to her obtaining a small revolver, which she now carried in a shoulder bag whenever she left the house.

“Our governess is armed,” Virginia told the members of her reading circle. “I believe she is the only armed governess in the country.”

“She should have no discipline problems then,” said one of the other members.

The ladies laughed. They felt sorry for governesses, who were drawn from the ranks of the unmarried and the unmarriageable. They were destined to be forever on the edges of families, their demesne the domestic schoolroom, their future one of contingency. And yet at the back of their minds was the thought that governesses might, for their part, feel sorry for *them*, thinking them untutored – which they often were – and dependent for their position on husbands, who could not always be trusted not to wander. At least a

governess need not worry about how she looked and could become old and plain with an impunity denied to wives, even if she did not start off that way.

Miss White was plain, by any standards. She was thin, particularly around the face and neck, which gave her a rather odd look – like that of a puppet whose head is only loosely connected to its body, and operated by a different set of strings. She wore too much make-up – particularly rouge, which she plastered on her cheeks in two large pink circles. Apart from this artificial dash of colour, she looked generally washed out, as if she had been rinsed and hung on the line to dry in the sun for too long.

“Poor Miss White,” whispered one of the members. “How sad that the only male attention she has received should be so clearly uninvited and unsuitable.”

This was greeted with suppressed smiles. “I do hope,” said one of the ladies, “she doesn’t over-react with that revolver of hers if some rather more appropriate man should make a pass at her. There’s a big difference between being slapped in the face and being shot.”

Under Miss White’s tutorship, Bella’s reading progressed by leaps and bounds. She developed, too, a neat copperplate in which she wrote entries in her private diary that she hid under an old nightdress in a drawer. She wrote out, too, the names of the pressed flowers she mounted in an old commercial ledger, including the Latin and, in some cases, the Sinhalese names for each plant.

“Very advanced,” said her father, with approval.

“I don’t think one should pretend things are easy,” said Miss White. “Education is a rigorous process. It is not possible to become educated without effort.”

“No,” mused Henry. “No doubt you’re right.” He did not recall ever having made much effort in his education –

such as it was. In fact, he was not entirely sure that he could describe himself as educated at all – not that it made any difference. You did not need to know much about history or geography or anything else very much to run a tea estate. Provided you knew about tea and its harvesting, he thought, had enough Tamil to be able to give orders and could prepare a balance sheet, you should do perfectly well, as he had done.

There were few children for Bella to play with – or at least few thought acceptable. There was the family of the Sinhalese accountant who was in charge of the finance office; they were Christians, and his two girls spoke excellent English, but their mother's own command of the language was weak, and reticence on her part prevented her from allowing the children to mix. There were other Scottish families on nearby estates – most of the estates were owned or run by Scots – and one of these families was not far away, on an estate called Inverness. They had two sons and a daughter, and the daughter was roughly Bella's age. But the two girls did not get on particularly well. Bella liked one of the boys, Richard, who, at ten, was two years older than she was, and whose company she enjoyed. There was something about him that intrigued her. She could not work out what it was, but when she was with him she found that she did not want others to be there. He made her feel strange inside – inexplicably so – and she liked to close her eyes in bed at night and think about him.

“I can see you like my brother,” said the other girl. “You're in love with him, aren't you?”

She blushed. “Of course not. Who likes boys? I don't.”

But she knew that this was not true. She did like boys. She did not know why, because they could be a nuisance, and they were often dirty; but she liked them.

To make up for the lack of human playmates, Bella

created personalities for her dolls. The two who were named after the Chinese poets, Li Po and Po Chü-i, were her constant companions, always with her, always watching what she was doing. They were both boys, she decided, and she had cut the long hair with which they had come and exchanged their dresses for masculine clothing. Li Po was the braver of the two and often had to try things before Po Chü-i would join in. Po Chü-i, though, was good at mathematics and drawing and had an invisible dog. They never fought, although Li Po sometimes accused Po Chü-i of being greedy and secretly helping himself to extra slices of cake. Li Po also had a pet whom only the two of them could see: a mongoose called, coincidentally, Rikki Tikki Tavi.

Virginia asked her whether she was enjoying her lessons with Miss White. "She's taught you so much," she said. "Your handwriting is so good now. And you've learned all those capital cities."

She did not reply, but stared steadfastly at the floor.

"So tell me, what is the capital city of . . . Now let me see, Canada? Yes, Canada. I'm sure you know that one."

"It's Ottawa."

"Of course it is. And what about Chile? That's a hard one. Could you point out Chile to me on a map?"

"It's in South America. Down at the bottom, on the left-hand side. And the capital is Santiago."

"My goodness! I'd probably have a bit of difficulty finding Chile myself. Not that I'm planning to go there, but still."

And then the question again. "And you like Miss White, don't you?"

There was something about the way the question was asked that put her on her guard. Did her mother want her to say that she disliked her? Was she being prompted to that

answer? If she said she did not like Miss White, then the governess might hear of it and punish her. That sort of thing happened – she was sure of it. It was safer – far safer – to like everybody.

“Of course.”

She noticed her mother’s disappointment. But then, “Well, that’s very good. It’s best to like people who are teaching you things. It makes learning all that much easier.”

Then her mother said, “Do you think Daddy likes Miss White too?”

She was not sure about that. Her father had never said anything about Miss White – at least not in her presence. She assumed that all adults liked one another, and she could see no reason why her father would be anything but well-disposed to the governess.

Virginia was waiting.

“Yes, I think he likes her.”

The next question was put very gently. “Why do you think that?”

She shrugged. “He’s never said that he doesn’t.”

“No, I don’t suppose he has.”

The subject was dropped. “Would you like me to read you *Hiawatha*?”

She nodded.

“From the beginning?”

A further nod.

She listened to the poem, lulled into a strange, dreamy state by the insistent rhythm of the tetrameter. She closed her eyes and saw the unfamiliar landscape she had seen portrayed in the illustrated edition from which her mother now read: the *shores of Gitche Gumee*, the *shining Big-Sea-Water*. But she opened her eyes at the warning and moved closer to her mother: “*Oh, beware of Mudjekeewis, Of*

the West-Wind, Mudjekeewis; Listen not to what he tells you; Lie not down upon the meadow, Stoop not down among the lilies, Lest the West-Wind come and harm you!"

Why would anybody want to harm anybody else? What could the wind do to you?

She had had enough. "Now the bit about Minnehaha."

"Yes, that's a lovely part." A pause. "You'd like to be called Minnehaha, wouldn't you?"

"It's a beautiful name."

In Calcutta, Miss White told Virginia, with a certain air of reproach, she had lived with the family. "Of course, it was a very large house – not quite as big as Government House itself, but not far off it. I had a suite of rooms, and a small library of my own. We had meals in a small dining room – the main dining room was used only for special occasions. Of course, Colonel Summers could use Government House for entertaining when the Lieutenant Governor himself was away on leave and he was Acting Governor." She paused. "That was a busy time for all of us, when that happened. To be Acting Governor of Bengal is no small thing, as you can imagine."

Virginia listened, pained at the implicit comparison between the status Miss White had enjoyed in Calcutta and the one that she had here, as a governess on a tea estate, and not even the biggest tea estate in that part of Ceylon.

"We do our best," she said. "We make do up here. In my family home in Colombo, things were different. My parents sometimes entertained the entire Chamber of Commerce to dinner. And some government people too. Thirty or forty people."