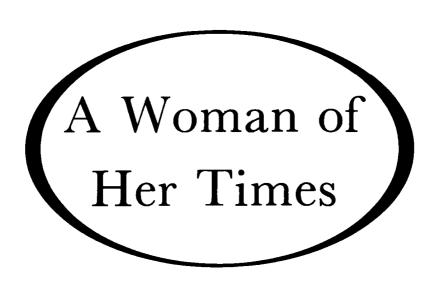
G.J. SCRIMGEOUR A WOMAN OF HER TIMES





G. J. Scrimgeour

For Norman Collins, who first gave me London,

and for all the other writers who made their worlds belong to me

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Typeset by D. P. Media Limited, Hitchin, Hertfordshire Printed and bound in Great Britain by Billing and Sons, Guildford and Worcester 'I should like you also to reflect that its events could have taken place only in a world where man considers himself superior to woman. In what the Americans call "a man's world". That is, a world governed by brute force, humourless arrogance, illusory prestige and primeval stupidity . . . Men love war because it allows them to look serious. Because they imagine it is the one thing that stops women laughing at them. In it they can reduce women to the status of objects. That is the great distinction between the sexes. Men see objects, women see the relationship between objects. Whether the objects need each other, love each other, match each other. It is an extra dimension of feeling we men are without and one that makes war abhorrent to all real women—and absurd. I will tell you what war is. War is a psychosis caused by an inability to see relationships. Our relationship with our fellow men. Our relationship with our economic and historical situation. And above all our relationship to nothingness. To death.'

JOHN FOWLES, The Magus



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February 1914

Elizabeth Wingate was not beautiful, but manners, grooming and voice made her seem so. She was a woman of her times. Or at least we now see such women – long hair pinned by amber combs to the back of the head, skirts falling in folds to just above the ankle, ruched white blouse clasped at the throat with ivory brooch bestowed by Victorian mother – we see them as the women of their time, as though everyone then belonged to the upper middle class, even shopgirls and tweenies and the chimney sweep's common-law wife, as though the richly feminine were the times' emblem, and Einstein had not had his bright idea a decade before, and there never would be a war, never a real war.

Elizabeth's Irish skin was still brushed with natural pink despite years of Ceylon's tropical sun and the growing fashion for rouge in the evenings. Her hair, touched with auburn as though she were eighteen rather than thirty-two, was full and gleaming, to make one think of riches and the bedroom. Her eyes were almost greenish and, because she did not wear glasses though a trifle short of sight, seemed more than ordinarily languid. As she leaned over the packing case in her room, one's eyes were drawn to her full lips, to the line of chin and throat, to the full bosom modestly concealed by pleated lawn but thrust forward by the boned corset beneath, so that even her seductiveness was ladylike, as though those women of her times waited, sheathed and pliable, for men to bring them to life.

That year before the war, she had servants, more servants than any woman in England, because native labour was cheap. Her own work was clean and passive: this slow, graceful unpacking, the writing of letters, the quietening of squabbles. She had leisure and did not realize that a life spent in morning visits,

shopping, reading, playing bridge, accompanying one's husband, was not only idle but antique. She danced, always, the waltz, for the two-step and the bunny hop had caught on only among the younger set, and she imitated youth only in allowing herself as the hot evening wore on to discard the long white gloves which she had been brought up to believe obligatory. Her education had been better than her mother's, but her mind as yet remained superior to any use she had made of it; she preferred Rudyard Kipling to Joseph Conrad, Elinor Glyn to H. G. Wells, and Somerset Maugham to George Bernard Shaw. Her habits of thought were those of Society, for she disciplined her ideas under good manners very much as she confined her flesh under the right clothes.

She revealed her times (here in this colonial mansion, pausing in a shaft of sunlight to lift personal articles from the wooden packing case) but she was not typical of them, for only the dully anonymous are typical, and she had too much character to be dull, too much wit to be anonymous, too much imaginativeness to be as smug as wealth, station and the colour of her skin would have allowed her to be. She would have been a success in London, even, and out here in the crown colony she had become the best friend of the Governor's wife.

Because it was 1914, there were occasions lately when, having read the newspaper to induce sleep, she lay open-eyed under the mosquito netting and canopy of her double bed and heard the wash of the great ocean upon the fragile eternal beach a hundred yards away and thought that she and her world were drifting, not sailing. But at thirty-two one clings to belief in purpose. One believes that the destiny of life is to triumph, not just to survive. And to be British in 1914, to be wealthy, to belong to the ruling class in a crown colony, to have just moved into a house that England would have called a mansion, to have a husband successful and handsome, and a new and long-awaited baby girl – surely this was triumph.

Ceylon is the land of Serendib, called the island of treasures. A lush green teardrop separated from the brash tumult of India by a channel even narrower than that which protects England from the Continent, Ceylon was in 1914 peacefully Buddhist under the distant Christian monarch and spent its time producing what one would expect of the fabled Orient: pearls and emeralds, spices and tea. There was, of course, the heat to put up with: the

damnable burning heat of the dry season, the suffocating prickly heat of the twice-yearly monsoons, and the unexpected warm bad breath of occasional typhoons swiping the island. There were, of course, malaria, cholera, dengue, suppurating ulcers, as well as the more usual English ills of measles and diphtheria and consumption and scarlet fever and infantile paralysis. But in Ceylon peace had lasted so long that it was easy now to pretend that life was threatened by nothing more than — as at this moment of Elizabeth lifting her head to listen — the wretched monkeys screeching in attack upon the fruit trees.

Elizabeth could hear the monkeys' cries through the open windows as she knelt on the carpet in front of her armoire, fussing at the creases in garments which had been packed inevitably dampish, and she could hear the shrieks of the native army she had deployed in counterattack. She could also hear baby Jennifer wailing in the great bare nursery at the southern end of the corridor. The child-raising theories of the day demanded that she pay instant attention, but Elizabeth ignored the cry; the ayah would return in a moment and attend to whatever was the matter. But then she heard a third sound, which made her clasp with unfortunate strength the linen skirt which happened to be in her hands. It was the sound of boot heels clacking on the staircase from the main floor. Elizabeth's expression became one of irritation tinged with guilt. Charles had returned early from his morning ride, and it was too bad that he should have found her ignoring Jennifer. His voice came to her, almost shouting, as male as the sound of his boots: 'And where the devil is the mem? I've told you - I don't care about the bloody monkeys in the bloody fruit trees - I've told you the baby is not to be left alone for a minute, and I come back to hear that!'

Poor Nona, thought Elizabeth, and set aside the white linen skirt with its fresh creases and rose from her knees and tucked a wisp of hair back into place and moved quickly towards the emergency.

The tall teak double doors of the nursery had been flung open, and the room stretched to the view: huge white walls and curtains, red tile floor. It was destined to become the dining room once they had settled in, but at the moment its only contents were a large wooden crate near the door, twin to that which Elizabeth had been emptying in her bedroom, and dead centre of the floor a cradle draped with white cretonne and mosquito net,

standing so alone in stripes of sunlight that it resembled a throne or perhaps a shrine. Just inside the doorway stood a proud native woman, gold jewellery shining against her dark skin, her sari the room's only touch of colour. She flashed a look at Elizabeth, encoded but indignant.

Charles had almost reached the cradle. Babies two months old measure the world by the extent of the attention they get, and this girl child's voice rose against her bare surrounds: a demand, a fear, a grief, a rage. And so Charles Wingate, a handsome man in the prime of life and pique, was all masculine solicitude as he bent over the cradle and lifted up his daughter, trailing lacy swaddling clothes.

'Did they leave her all alone, poor pet?' he cooed. 'There, there, Daddy's little princess . . . There, there, now . . .' Well, what's done is done, thought Elizabeth, and was suddenly struck by the contrast: this most male of men in this most female of postures. At her elbow, Nona jangled golden bangles and muttered, probably of the injustices which fatherhood levies on servants. Clutched to her father's chest, the baby stopped her wail and lifted her head up to make sure who held her. Wobblynecked, she seemed reassured. What might have been a smile came over her face, and she let the tiresome head fall against his shoulder.

As Charles turned towards Elizabeth, she cannily pre-empted his complaint by speaking first. 'You will really spoil her, Charles.' Her tone was firm but light, and she let an edge of irritation show. Her voice was Elizabeth's great distinction. It was low, mannish, variable as a musical instrument, and instantly attractive. Whenever she spoke, one listened to more than her words.

'But look at her, Elizabeth!' Pre-empted, he had now been made to seem querulous. 'Her face is flushed. She could have a fever. God knows how long she's been crying while these bloody monkeys chase their friends in the garden.' The two parents stared at the baby in his arms, as though posing for a portrait of the perfect couple. Both were aware that he had gone too far.

'It's too bloody hot in this room,' he grumbled.

The point was beyond dispute. Lying only a few degrees north of the equator, Ceylon is not as hot as India, but it will cause northern Europeans, like their flowers, to wilt. Its heat is of the kind in which the chatter of monkeys or the irregular clanging of

a far-off Buddhist bell can produce an instant anger out of nowhere, which is then allayed as quickly by lassitude.

'I told the ayah to get rid of the monkeys,' said Elizabeth, pressing her attack. 'Last evening you complained. The outside servants had not noticed . . .' The outside servants were Charles's responsibility. Quickly she smiled, lightening both tone and manner. 'Our precious Jennifer seems to have fallen asleep again. You must have given her exactly what she wanted. Let me check her temperature.'

It was her concession to save his face. She took the baby, cupped a hand on its forehead, then handed it to the ayah with a glance at Charles. 'You know as well as I do that the natives worship babies! Put her down again, will you, Nona? She's wet, but leave her for now. Put the netting down again.' The women's eyes met in small conspiracy. Elizabeth looked at Charles and, since he had not accepted her hint that an apology was due to the ayah, she chose to drive her point home. 'The danger is in spoiling her, not neglecting her. These things are really better left to us.'

She was being unusually firm. She regarded Charles's behaviour as an intrusion into her domain. But Charles heard the remonstrance as no more than a wheedle, and (husband, father) he let himself be wheedled.

'A night nurse and a day nurse, and I come back from riding to find her left alone! I'll be glad when that nanny arrives. How else are we going to free you to go out during Colombo Week?'

Soft, this confrontation between husband and wife, in a time when softness was valued and when the woman, having won, made the man the victor. She moved towards him, becoming winsome and somehow shorter, and she took his left arm with the lightest, firmest weight of both her linked hands, and turned him, by means of this weight and the momentum of his own politeness, towards the door, the exit from argument, the breakfast that awaited them downstairs.

'She'll be here on the *Oronsay* on Tuesday, rain or shine. Are you ready for breakfast, or do you want to bathe first?' She watched him give baby and ayah one last inspection from the door, and thought, studying his face, You'd really be a bit of a stick if it weren't for those eyes.

Their unusual grey made Charles's eyes the focal point of his face. His features were regular and, although the tropical sun

and forty-two years of life had removed the blandness of youth, they had not yet laid bare the revelations of middle age. His chin and jaw were too Victorianly resolute, but the disreputably high arch of his eyebrows and the curve of his full lips gave him a usual expression of good temper. His brown hair was suppressed by brilliantine. The moustache was thick, but short-clipped to fit respectability. Thus, as with all products of mannered generations, one could see even on Charles's surface the conflicts that lay within. He was a middle-aged man, tall, handsome, well muscled, confident – but not as inalterable nor as immaculate as he looked. Elizabeth tugged gently at his elbow to make him lead her out of the room and down the wide staircase.

'Shall we have the carpeting tomorrow?' Her inquiry had a touch of feigned breathlessness and she did not pause for answer. 'This place is so enormous! It's just as well that silly man put electric wiring in only half of it.' She gestured at a loop of wires festooned over the balustrade. 'We have to do something about that! I don't think we can fill the east wing with our belongings anyway and, except for the morning room, we could close it off, I suppose . . .'

Amused by her girlishness, he accepted the bait. 'The east wing?' He smiled. 'You make us sound like bluebloods instead of Johnny-come-latelies!'

'You know what I mean.' She almost pouted. 'Without new furniture we shall rattle around like peas in a pod.'

A traditional gambit, it might seem, but Elizabeth was a trifle overwhelmed by the big house into which they had moved this very week. In the newly fashionable suburb of Mount Lavinia, a discreet distance from the old Barnes mansion, which had recently been turned into a busy family hotel, the house lay back from low cliffs fronting a crescent of golden beach, palm trees and blue ocean that brought a healthy breeze. Mosquitoes were rare here, and the natives' fishing village was just remote enough to make the scene exotic. It was only that Elizabeth was not quite used to it; new furnishings from England would make it less Eastern.

The Wingates had abandoned their Colombo house, scarcely more than a bungalow really, because it was too unhealthy for the baby and too small – far too small – for Charles Wingate's status and income. At the moment they had a sense of living up to the new home: three solid storeys of imposing stone, veran-

dahed, balconied, shuttered, porticoed, even balustraded. Separate buildings housed the servants' quarters, the laundry, the stables, the garage and the kitchens. The rooms offered frightening vacancies, but there would come a time when the Wingates would occupy them like conquerors. Grounds and rooms would slowly surrender. Over there would be a court for lawn tennis, and those palms would give way (salt air permitting) to a croquet lawn of imported turf, and just this side of the kitchen garden would be the spot for Jennifer's playing, and, once the purple waterfalls made by the jacarandas were tamed, there would be room for rosebushes.

Charles and Elizabeth both caught the foretaste of permanence as they sat to breakfast on the sun-screened south veranda in rattan chairs while their Sinhalese head boy, Abbuhamy, a man of some fifty years, many grandchildren and the dignity brought by long and successful service, laid before them a breakfast of kippers, eggs, toast, curried kidney, tomato and fried potato. Elizabeth poured tea with the delicate wrist of wifely deference. Charles thanked her as he took cup and saucer.

Like many men, Charles tended to see his wife less as the Elizabeth Malloy he had courted and captured than as Mrs Charles Wingate. He behaved towards her as he believed Mr Charles Wingate should and, because this made him susceptible to whatever small wiles she chose to use, it amused Elizabeth. She could reduce him to generic propriety in an instant.

'Peace at last,' she sighed, sipping her tea and not seeming to look at him. They sat in contented silence as Elizabeth thought out her next small plan of campaign and Charles's mind began to turn to the office. Elizabeth's present dilemma was brought about by a slight touch of guilt. She was well aware that her concern for Jennifer's well-being was not as overwhelming as Charles would have liked. This baby had been long awaited, and at thirty-two she had felt too old to be a mother for the first time but, to her surprise, the coming of Jennifer had been untraumatic. She floated through pregnancy and confinement with an ease which belied the general belief that nature and the angry God of Eden had decreed childbirth the sole but murderous route from femaleness to womanhood, and now she saw Charles's paternalism as both temporary and exaggerated. Since the image of proprietous motherhood was at least as important as the reality, however, she could not simply tell him that he fussed too much.

He might think she fussed too little. There has to be, she thought, a gentler way, a safer way. She also thought, I should have guessed he might come home early from riding. I brought this on myself. I shouldn't have given him occasion to get angry.

But guilt was not enough quite to stifle her irritation at his trampling over her domestic boundaries, and now (after an unconscious sigh) she began carefully to restore them. 'I know Nona irritates you, dear, and I'm sorry.'

'Not important,' he said.

'Perhaps,' she continued after a measuring pause, 'it would be easier if you left her to me. After all, she was only doing what I had told her to do, and I'd hate to have her start not doing things on the excuse that you'd told her something different.' Charles did not seem to be listening, which meant that he was attending, so she continued. 'You've got the office and the plantation and all the stables to worry about already, so perhaps it might be easier just to let me know if something upsets you, and I'll attend to it. We do have a new nanny coming, and I'll have to get on with her, too, won't I?'

'If you let the beggars take an inch,' suddenly replied Charles, 'they'll take a mile.' They had a staff of more than twenty, mostly new, and to Charles there seemed always to be a scurrying of small relatives with dark faces, white eyeballs, ingratiating smiles and mangled English politenesses. 'You have to be firm with them. If you let them chase monkeys, that's all they'll do.'

Elizabeth glanced apprehensively at the dignified Abbuhamy, who happened at that moment to be clearing their plates. Charles really ought to be more discreet, she thought. But it sounded as though Charles were delegating his authority to her, which was exactly what she wanted, so she sacrificed Abbuhamy's feelings and proceeded with her main objective. 'It's just a matter of convenience, really, isn't it? A woman having to have the authority in the household? I'd never thought of it in those terms, but...'

She let the sentence trail off as though the idea were too energetic for her powers of pursuit. She had chosen her moment very well, just as Charles had lit the first pipe of his day, so he surrendered without thinking about it. As he settled back into the creaking chair, he stretched a jovial arm to rub her shoulder. It was his usual sign of truce.

'Shall you come with me to meet the nanny on Tuesday

morning?' It was his way of signalling acknowledgement of her rights as mother and wife.

'Oh, I should love to,' she said, a trifle too effusively, flushed by the ease of her victory. 'But I do hope she disembarks well before the gymkhana, or it'll be such a busy day, getting her settled.'

'Hours before,' said Charles confidently. 'She'll be with us by nine at the latest. We'll both go, then?' He stood up and kissed the top of her head. 'I'm going to change. Anything you need in the city? I'll send a boy down to see about that carpeting, but I can't imagine there'll be any problem. Too big an order to ignore, what?'

'Can you send the motor back? I have a fitting at Thresher and Glenny's, and it's so much faster than the carriage. I might drop in at Cargill's about the new stuff for curtains.'

'Joe Plunkett's back in town, and I'm asking him for dinner tonight. Tell Abbuhamy, would you? I'll bring him home around teatime, so send Tara Singh back around four, will you?' Tara Singh, a Sikh with full beard and enormous dignity, was their chauffeur, and tended to intimidate them as much by mechanical competence as by his turbanned and towering stature. He and his family shared a special bungalow on the grounds with the motorcar, an object even more awesome than he to both Elizabeth and Charles.

'Of course, dear,' replied Elizabeth, and placed herself and smiled in such a way that Charles gave her a husbandly embrace and walked inside with her tucked under his arm.

The affairs of the world thus disposed to everyone's satisfaction, Abbuhamy was left to clear the table, which he did with an expression less than veiled and a clatter more than accidental. From the servants' quarters rose the sudden shrill of a domestic squabble, suddenly stilled. In front of the house a Tamil clad only in loincloth chopped clumsily at the coarse dhoab grass overgrowing the edges of the flowerbeds, and the gatekeeper squatted in the shade to watch. A great bird or animal screamed in the broadleafed trees at the bottom of the garden, but the shrill of the insects and the rhythm of the ocean were uninterrupted. Upstairs Nona sat cross-legged on the floor beside the cradle, fanning herself and her boredom. Jennifer, feverless, slept steadily on in the quiet, white-walled room. The Wingate family was in order and at peace.



Men like Charles Wingate are at their worst when playing husband and father. They perform self-consciously. They speak the lines and seem stuffy. They feel awkward and act poorly. From men like Charles, the times expected not kindness, only benevolence; not truthfulness, only earnestness; not sensitivity, but work; not perceptiveness, but duty. He had done well indeed at what the age had told him a man should do. He did not yet know what more he could do.

In 1914 Charles (like the Empire which sheltered him) saw no need for change. Those changes which he had just endured - the new home, fatherhood - were such as he had anticipated, caused. At forty-two he was reaching the apex of his career, and his rise, like that of the Empire, originated from ability and resulted in complacency. The British Empire believed that it set the norm for civilized behaviour for the world, and Charles Wingate thought almost as highly of his marriage. The least that Empire and husband expected was civility; the most they needed was obedience. They called deeds of emotion bad form, thereby refusing to anticipate the novelties which others' passions bring, and Charles Wingate dressing for the office that morning worried about nothing more than a nick on his chin caused by the straight-edged razor. Safety razors, like wristwatches, he vaguely regarded as effeminate, and that was enough to make him hurt himself rather than change.

Charles Wingate came from the Hampshire gentry, which meant that his family was well enough bred to receive invitations to every ball in the county and too poor to reciprocate. The family funds went to education rather than entertainment, and Charles, having shown himself dutiful enough to benefit from the education, was also fit enough to find his own entertainment. In 1889, two years after the Empire celebrated Victoria's fiftieth