



SPINSTER

Sylvia Ashton-Warner



The book of the Julian Blaustein Film production *Spinster*, starring Shirley MacLaine, Laurence Harvey, and Jack Hawkins. Released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

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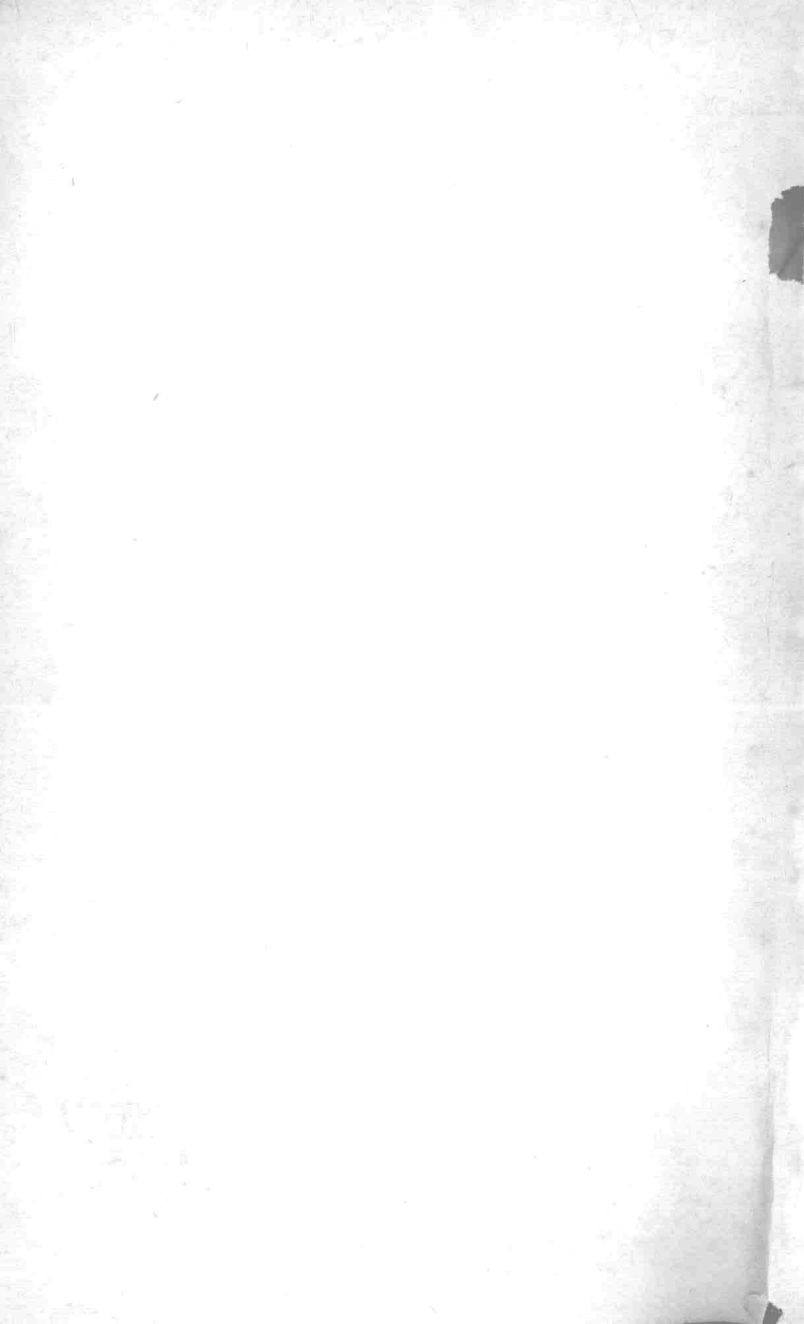
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SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER

夫小说





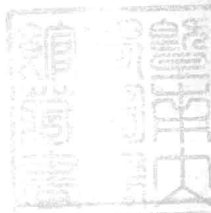
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SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER

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To K

SPRING

'I want the one rapture of an inspiration.'

‘WHAT is it, what is it, Little One?’

I kneel to his level and tip his chin. Tears break from the large brown eyes and set off down his face.

‘That’s why somebodies they tread my sore leg for notheen. Somebodies.’

I sit on my low chair and take him on my knee and tuck his black head beneath my chin.

‘There . . . there . . . look at my pretty boy.’

But at night when I am in my slim bed, away from the chaos and hilarity of my infant-room, it is I who am the Little One. Before I turn out the light above me and open the window behind, I take out my photo. It is pillow-worn, finger-worn, and tear-worn, yet the face of the man is alive. I read into it all the expressions I have known; and the attention my spinster heart craves. But memory only loosens the tears. No longer does Eugene take me on his knee, tuck my black head beneath his chin and say, ‘There . . . there . . . look at my pretty girl.’

Not for many long virgin years.

But here is the spring again with its new life, and as I walk down my back steps ready for school in the morning I notice the delphiniums. They make me think of men. The way they bloom so hotly in the summer, then die right out of sight in the winter, only to push up mercilessly again when the growth starts, is like my memory of love. They’re only shoots so far but I can’t help recalling how like the intense blue of the flowers is distilled passion. Living the frugal life that I do I am shocked at the glamour they bring to my wild garden and at the promise of blue to come. With no trouble at all I break apart into sobbing. What luxury is self-pity! How blessed to weep in the spring!

But you can’t get this sort of thing to last and soon there is

only sniffing left. And confound it, here's my face to wash and powder again. Also I'd better take some brandy to make my legs go. Yet as I come down the back steps for the second time these tender shoots are still hard to pass. They've got so much to say. There's something so mature about them, as if there was little they didn't know.

However, you don't drink half a tumbler of brandy for nothing and soon I'm severely immune. I walk out and away from the garden, singing an orderly tune.

Yet, when I have crossed the paddock between the rambling old house and the school and reach the cabbage trees that divide them, and when the pre-fab where I teach comes into view, I run into something that does more than renew life in a garden. It is something you find on your shoulders with tight legs clasping your neck. I thought I had forgotten Guilt. I thought he was gone for good, and not merely into hiding for the winter. But oh, these precarious springs! Is there nothing that does not resume life?

My song stops. So does my step. I lurk among the trunks like one of my five-year-old newcomers. If only I had done all that inspectors had told me in the past – whenever they wanted me to, in the way they wanted me to and for the reason! If only I had been a good teacher, an obedient teacher and submissive! If only I could have remained in the safety of numbers that I knew when I was young! But no, I've always been wrong.

Yet it can't be too late. True, the mistakes have all been mine, but this is the ground I'll build on. Plainly the inspectors are all good men and all I need to do is to cooperate. What could be easier or more profitable? Slowly I will recover my lagging professional status and prove myself a thoroughly useful force in the service. Then maybe this Old Man Guilt will release my throat and I'll be one with others at last. How fortunate to have these chances! After all everything else comes up new in the spring: flowers and guilt and love. Why not my teaching? With a new courage, not wholly originating in my plans, I walk forward again.

... or try to, through the clusterings and questionings and greetings of my Little Ones.

'Miss Vorontosov,' inquires Mohi, 'how old do you weigh?'

I can see that I'm not going to like this young Vercoe who has been appointed temporarily to the school: a teacher-in-training fresh from the Emergency Course in which teachers are trained in half the time to meet twice the difficulties of the staff shortages since the war. How he comes to be selected at all can only be put down to the desperate shortage of teachers. Where has he come from, anyway? From what strange soil of life has evolved that mixture of culture and gutter in his voice? Why has he chosen children? Why isn't he married, with a surplus of women after the war? Why hasn't that face taken him to the front line of a chorus on a New York stage? He's young but he's still had time to try and fail in other things. Yet, as I emerge from the trees between my house and the school and see him standing uncertainly there by the Big School steps, the sun touching his hair and outlining his story-book features, my general dislike for bachelors does not wholly take over. I can't help feeling touched at his youth, and his strangeness to the world about him.

So that as I make my way across the frost to the pre-fab where I teach, through the greeting hands of my Little Ones, and their dark upturning eyes, I still see him in mind. And although it is far from comfortable for me to think of men, I cannot escape the interest they bring. The faultless blue of his eyes reminds me of the delphiniums and the glamour of my garden in spring.

'Miss Vorontosov,' cries Whareparita from the Big School, running gaily up to me as I mount the dingy steps of the pre-fab, 'how old are you?'

'Good God!'

'It's my turn to take the quizz session in class this morning and it would do for one of my questions.'

I plough through all my talking, laughing, pulling Little Ones . . . the brown, the few white, and the brown-white of the New Race . . . across the spare pre-fab to the piano the Head has bought with his last Show-Day funds and unlock it for the day. If you don't lock it you'll find apple-juice on the precious keys and crumbs of biscuits and lolly papers. Next I put my pen-box on the table. Then I unlock the storeroom where I keep the guitar, away from boys who can't play it, and reach down my box of pre-war chalk from behind some books where I hide it. I stoke the fire which has been lit previously by a boy. Then I tuck up my sleeves, damp the sand in the container, send Blossom and Bleeding Heart out for a bucket of water for the trough, tie the flared fullness of my short red smock behind me in a business-like knot, pull on a sack apron, and get to work on preparing the clay. No. I'll mix the paints first before I wet my hands.

'Matawhero, get out the pencils. Waiwini, put out the books. Little Brother, use your handkerchief. Reremoana, go and tell Mr Reardon the wood boy has not brought the wood. One-Pint, get out of the sand. Hine, put the papers on the easel. Who's got my . . . where's my . . . who is this dear wee boy? Did you come to see Miss Vorontosov? Here, Patchy, show this wee new boy a picture book. Sit him by the fire. Where's my . . .? What are you laughing at, Bleeding Heart? You mustn't laugh at my little New One. Who's got my . . .? Are you big enough to open the windows, little Dennis? Look at the big long legs and arms Dennis has got! Ani, tidy my . . . I mean dust my table. Who's got my . . .? Tuck in your shirt, Matawhero . . . Seven! Don't you frighten that little boy! Look, who's got my . . .?'

'Miss Vorontosov,' inquires Bleeding Heart, 'what for those smell by your breff?'

'Aa . . . hair-oil.'

I suppose, I reflect, picking up a bundle of tears and toes and fingers from the mat, that my mate God will see fit to excuse this brandy in the morning; He'll arrange for some

measure of forgiveness in His extravagant way. I stroke the fat brown finger with the mark of a high heel upon it.

'You tread my sore han for nutteen.'

'There . . . there . . . look at my pretty boy . . .'

He may pardon me for drinking myself to school. I demand it, expect it, and will even accept it. But for blundering in my art I don't. My bastard art. For lack of precision I want no pardon. Don't ever forgive me for that, God. Save it up for the age of oldness and haunt me with a shoe. Save up a finger, a child, and a scream, and for punishment that will do.

In my unsteadiness I place one foot carefully before the other, balancing my way to the new piano, through the others, watching for more little pieces of trusting humanity on the floor. Although my comforting hasn't worked, Schubert's will. Sitting Little Brother across my knees I grope round him to the keys.

Together we take an Impromptu, to get over the fashionable shoe, and by the time the tears on his face have dried, the tears on my heart have too.

'Miss Vorontofof,' says Mohi, 'you got ugly hands.'

'That's because I'm old.'

'You shouldent be old!'

'Why not? I can be old if I like.'

'Nanny's old, but she's not ugly.'

'Well I am, and I like it.'

'You should be new.'

'Why?'

'Because you're lovely.'

The thing about teaching is that while you are doing it no yesterday has a chance. If only I could get here! Why waste a half-tumbler of brandy in the morning in order to lose the past when you lose it among the Little Ones anyway? Is this drinking necessary? After all I have only to cross the paddock through the trees and here I am saved. Why is the setting out so hard? Do I actually want memory, as much as

it wants me? Are Eugene and I still so engrossed that even time and oceans fail? Ah, these intricacies! They're too confused for a drunk teacher to solve. I only know that the call of the bell each morning means a dangerous crystal tumbler.

Yet I teach well enough on brandy. Once it has fired my stomach and arteries I don't feel Guilt. It supplies me with a top layer to my mind so that I meet my fifty Maori infants as people rather than as the origin of the Inspectors' displeasure; and whereas I am so often concerned on this account with the worst in children, I now see only the best. Never do I understand them more, and never is better creative work done. As the legs release my throat some magnificent freedom comes to us all and the day leads off like a party. More and more I learn to see what a top layer can be. You can bear more. The encloistered soul may sally without risk. It is sheltered: it is buffered. It can endure more of the feeling in this exhausting art. Indeed, the only thing that seriously upsets me is this unpardonable loss of precision in my bastard art and the damage to my nylons when I walk too inaccurately between the stove and the easel. Which means another fifteen-and-six, which has a relation to my freedom when I come to think about it. Fifteen-and-six less for my ticket. Fifteen-and-six further away from that boat steaming out through the Wellington Heads. Fifteen-and-six more of this bell . . . hell or whatever I mean . . . Intoxicating . . .

'Can I sit with Patchy again?' asks Matawhero.

I look at him from my low chair in perplexity. This question has a significance of some kind if only I could put my finger on it. But although we have all been in school for about half an hour this Monday morning I have not yet wholly made the change from the world of the week-end to this one. I draw my hand across my eyes, trying to brush away the mornings of intense work in Selah and the evenings of music and church.

'Can I?'

'Can you what?'

Really, it's confusing, this overlapping of two worlds. Does it amount to a fall or a rise, this crossing through the trees?

'Can I?'

'I beg your pardon?' I brush my face again more severely as though there were cobwebs collected upon it, obscuring my view. And to an extent it works because whereas before I felt there was some significance in this thought of Matawhero's, now I realize there is even more to it. If only I could see what's under my nose. I take a deep breath and concentrate. 'What did you say, Matawhero?'

'Aw, hell, I said it a hundred times. Can I sit with Patchy again?'

Ah, I see it! Why doesn't he just get up and go and sit with Patchy under his own power?

The children have broken away from the morning gathering on the mat and are finding their favourite things to do. Voices are rising and the noise of feet. There are shirts that should be tucked in and noses that should be attended to. Matawhero grasps both my knees and trains the full force of his brown eyes upon me. 'Can I can I?'

So much asking! Who am I, the law or God?

'Why not, Little One?'

Patchy is pleased. His fair face lights up and every freckle sparkles. 'You always want to tit wit me,' he says.

Ah, I see something else! The brown and the white meet. Even though they can't mix. I brush my face again more effectively. Steadily those evenings of reading, Beethoven, Schubert, thinking, working, and remembering, move inland. Only in blood and by blood, claims my mind, can the races mix. Yet communication of any kind must be a step towards understanding of some kind, which is the only path I know towards toleration.

But I'm still not wholly myself. Not only the echoes of the music come back to me: the lethargy following the long and hard hours of work in Selah this morning follows me. Plainly there are two worlds, and in which do I truly belong? Must I really drink myself through the trees over into this room of

raw reality five times a week? No other job in the world could possibly dispossess one so completely as this job of teaching. You could stand all day in a laundry, for instance, still in possession of your mind. But this teaching utterly obliterates you. It cuts right into your being: essentially, it takes over your spirit. It drags it out from where it would hide.

Unerringly the inner restlessness provokes a bodily one. The sense of conflict brings me to my feet and drives me stepping carefully among the fingers and toes on the floor. What exactly am I? To what world do I really belong? The intoxicating one of paint and music, memory and wine, or to this jagged-edged one of rough reality? To phantasy or to . . . Small hands find mine or pull at my smock for everlasting attention. 'Miss Poppoff, Twinnie's she's draween on my side!' cries Twinnie.

'Miss Vontopop,' shouts Tame, 'Bleedeen Heart he won't learn!'

'Make him then,' I answer from one half of me while the other half, from its unease, sees a picture of a big boat steaming serenely out of the harbour of this country out into the open sea.

'He won't listen.'

'Make him listen.'

'I teachd him and he won't listen.'

With a sense of saving myself I cling to these accusations of Tame's. Diligently I apply myself. Something tells me that this stormy pre-fab is the real and the right and the safe half of my world. 'What did you say, Tame?' I ask anxiously.

'Bleedeen Heart he won't learn! Bleedeen Heart!'

'You'll have to make him.' These children will have to just teach each other for the time being. I'm busy.

'Shall I biff him, or just teach?'

I haven't got an answer for the moment and I look up across the sun-streaked pre-fab-full of vivid, black-haired life, to Bleeding Heart's face smiling at us with that grand