Attia Hosain

PHOENIX FLED

AND OTHER STORIES

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY

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A WOMAN AND A CHILD

AFTER five empty weeks of waiting she decided to go to the city. Her husband raised no objection; he never did. He had been hag-ridden by his mother:

"Marry again, my son. Marry again. She has brought us nothing but barren death."

He did not obey, for his wife's passionate conviction that she could and would bear him a child, her tears, her tempers, her accusations, were stronger than his mother's bullying and pleading.

Utterly worn out, he sought refuge in God. Those remnants of his will which he could salvage, he offered to Him. His body submitted to the importunate demands of his wife, but his spirit unwound itself. He accompanied her on her many pilgrimages, but when she cried and implored, "Oh Great One, have mercy on me! Fill my empty life!" he prayed, "Lord, let my life be empty of all but Thee!"

She said, "There is a new lady-doctor at the zenana hospital."

He stopped counting his beads: "There is a Saint's tomb there also."

She answered in impatient anger: "You know I have been there twice already. I have sacrificed goats, I have offered chadars of the finest muslin. What have I left undone?"

"We go to so many places that I get confused. Ah well, I shall make the arrangements."

She had dragged herself from shrine to shrine. "I am a sinner, but, Pirji, if you pray for me Allah will not refuse you."

While she humbled her spirit, she pampered her body. She dressed as a young bride, imagining that from the illusion she would wring the fulfilment of her desire. The bright colours of her 'dupatta' cast kind shadows on her ageing face, and the folds of her clothes hid the hard outlines of her body.

On the train she squeezed her way through struggling, nagging women into the corner nearest the mother who nursed her child. Her eyes slipped mechanically over the others, and returned again and again to the suckling child. The mother drew her veiling 'dupatta' over the child's head; it pulled the thin cloth aside with a dimpled hand, and drew its mouth away from her wet breast. She buttoned her 'kurta', and the smile on her lips was reflected in her eyes. The child pulled at the black cord knotted around its wrist to thwart the evil eye, then slowly reached up to touch the spots of light that shone brightly in the dark eyes looking down.

"Oh light of my eyes," the mother laughed. "Would you blind me?"

She caught the exploring finger between her teeth, and the child gurgled with laughter.

"You are blessed with a beautiful child."

The startled mother looked up at the staring stranger, and, clasping the child more closely in her protecting arms, said, "Allah keep her from the evil eye. My life, my love . . ."

"Masha-alla, may those who wish her evil never prosper! Come, my little one, come to me. See what I will give you."

She held out her hand, and the bells of her bracelet jingled, the glass bangles caught sparkling gleams of light. The child stared curiously with eyes as black as the 'tika' between its brows, then hid its face in the mother's breast. The mother rocked gently, smiling: "My little Rani, why are you afraid? No one will hurt you while I am here." Her eyes shone as she sang softly, "Sleep, my precious one, star of my eyes. . . ."

When the child was asleep the mother asked, "How many children have you?"

"I have none."

"Poor soul! Did you lose them too?"

"I never had any."

"Allah's ways are strange; He seems to have given you wealth, but denied you the richest of all gifts."

The simple kindliness of the woman robbed the

words of their sting. She did not feel resentment, and that was strange. Her own people made her feel unwanted, as if there were a curse on her. They also asked, "You have no children?" but with no sympathy. First they were curious, then contemptuous, and finally resentful of her useless existence.

She remembered one instance particularly. It was her brother's wedding. The women crowded round the scented red bundle that was the bride; custom's licence unfettered their tongues. One of the bride's companions said, "Enough of this! The girl is tired," and she joked, "She must feel the weight within her of her night-old child." Her mother-in-law said scornfully, "How would you know who never felt it?" and someone cut in, "May the evil eye be far from the bride, and may she blossom and flower!"

The mother interrupted her thoughts: "Do not look so unhappy."

"I was thinking . . . why did you say, 'Did you lose them *too*?'"

"Because I lost mine, four of them—all sons. Two died of fever and one was born dead." The mother's voice held no trace of bitterness in its resignation.

"How did the fourth die?"

"Opium. I gave it to him—a little at a time—when I had too much work to do. That was when there was a strike in the printing press where my

husband works. I had to take in sewing and embroidery, and the child would disturb me, so I gave him opium. I must have left some lying about, and he took it unknowing, child-like. . . ." The mother, reaching back through memory, stopped, then continued : "It was God's will. He took away what He had given me."

"To some He gives nothing."

"You must not say that. You are not ill, you are not old. My aunt told me about a woman of fifty who had her first baby after carrying it a year or more. Never despair of God's goodness."

"I have prayed; I have been to every shrine. I have tried wearing holy amulets, and drinking holy water. Sometimes I think that all the holy water my husband has drunk has thinned his blood."

"There is a fakir in my village whose amulets have great power. I shall send for one for you. Where shall I find you?"

"I have tried everything; I have even been to hakims and doctors. I am now going to see the lady-doctor who has just come to the City Hospital. You will find me in Nawabganj in the Lane of Attar-makers."

"Fate must have brought us together. I live there too, just above the shop of Ahmad Husain Muhammad Husain, the cloth merchants. I shall bring you the amulet myself. . . . The train is stopping. I hope my husband comes to help me

with the luggage. I do not wish to wake the child."

"I can have no such hope. My husband must be counting his beads, busy preparing for his arrival in heaven. I suppose I'll have to go and look for him. It is he who ought to wear the 'burqa'. . . ."

She wasted little time in getting to the hospital.

The doctor croaked like a bird of ill-omen. "You cannot have a child. I can operate, if you wish, but I promise nothing. . . ."

In panic of the knife she thought of the promised amulet, and sought out the woman she had met on the train. Until it was brought to her she existed in a suffocating darkness vibrant with doubts and fears. She wore it, and drank the holy water in which it was washed. The weeks of waiting that followed were as empty as her womb.

She returned to the hospital.

During clinical examinations her body had accepted the tearing of veils of prudery; now it was ready to accept a tearing of its very tissues unto the death that concealed itself within her and made barren the seed of life. For ten days she lay in the hospital, and was surrounded by the sounds of motherhood. She could hear the cries of women in labour, and was bitterly envious of their fruitful agony. She could hear the sounds of babies crying in hunger, and her dry breasts ached. She could hear them cry fretfully, and her

empty arms longed to hold and soothe them. Then in bitterness and despair she wished them dead, all the sounds of life hushed, all fertility struck arid.

During visiting hours she picked out the rapid, eager footsteps of children in the passage. Sometimes curious ones peeped into the room, then scampered off. Not one of them came in.

Two days before she was to leave her friend came to see her, but without the child.

"Forgive me, sister, I could not come to see you for the little one was ill, and you know how frightened that makes me."

"Where have you left her now?"

"She is with the doctor. You told me that the lady-doctor was clever, so I brought her here. I'll bring her to see you when they have finished examining her."

"You must take great care of her; she is very precious."

"How well I know it! I know that I can have no more children. I wished for a son, but God has willed it otherwise. Now you will have a son, and I shall share your happiness."

The day she was leaving hospital the sweeper-woman came to her for the old clothes she took as her due. She threw them on the floor, careful not to touch this hag made impure by the filth and excrement she was ordained by birth to clean. She hated the woman, her ugliness, her pitying

references to the operation. She disliked the secretive manner with which she came near and whispered, "I can tell you something of interest to you."

"What do you mean? I want nothing from you."

"So many come here like you hoping to have children. So few have them. I can help you if the doctor cannot."

"I do not want your help."

"You never can tell. If you ever need me, you can send for me."

She put on her 'burqa' and followed her waiting husband to the curtained tonga.

The familiar empty pattern of waiting days and weeks followed. In the midst of his prayers and meditations her husband grew restless.

"Soon the pilgrims will start for Mecca. . . ."

"You and your pilgrimage! God knows you'll never be too old for that."

The bond of life's expectancy that held them together grew strained. She became increasingly conscious of her dislike and contempt for this weak, meek man. Her affections shrank and drew themselves into a focus of intensity. All the love that she stored for her unborn, she lavished on the child she had seen on the train. It became the only reason for continued existence while she waited for life to begin within her. She dressed the little one like a doll. She delighted in the child's pleasure in each new gift. She prepared special food

and sweets for her. The waiting days lost their blankness.

The simple mother was drawn to her by the common bond of their love, glad the child was given all those things which she herself could not afford but longed to give. One day the mother laughed and said, "She is more your child than mine. She will not rest when she is away from you."

"She will never be away from me. Will you, my love?"

The child ran on unsteady feet, clung to her and called her "Amma!"

From that day a sense of possession grew in her. She became jealous of the mother, grudged her the time the child was alone with her. Her fevered imagination made herself the mother.

Two months after her return from the hospital she sent for the sweeper-woman.

"You said you could help me. What can you do for me?"

"If you eat the cord of a first-born baby you will have a child. I can get it for you from the hospital as I have done for others."

"Get out of my sight, you ill-fated witch!" She shuddered with horror and loathing.

The day came when in desperation and anguish she sent for the hated woman again. It was not long before the woman returned with a bottle wrapped in a dirty newspaper, took a rupee in

payment, gave gratuitous advice, and went away triumphant.

The day that followed was one of exhaustion. Each time she retched she felt as if the death within her would be forced out of her womb, take the shape of a monstrous jinn and possess her completely.

When the child came to see her, after what seemed an unlimited stretch of time, she was still in bed. She stroked its hair with trembling hands, and her caressing voice was weak. The child played for a while near her, then, disappointed when no new toy was given, no new games played, went home. The mother came in the evening.

"What is wrong? I understood from the child's chatter that something had happened to you, and I came as soon as I could get away from my work."

"Nothing is seriously wrong; my stomach is upset."

"It must be this horrible food one gets now. It would not surprise me if these wretched butchers fed us on dog's meat or human flesh."

"How can you talk like that? Give me that bowl; I feel sick."

"Poor, poor thing! Why don't you send for a hakim?"

"I hate them; I hate all of them."

Surprised by the venomous bitterness in her voice the mother said, "Please don't be angry. I merely suggested it because you look so ill."

Again for some time the child stayed away and the house was unbearably silent. Her longing for the child's presence became an obsession. At last she sent a desperate message, and the mother brought the child that very evening. She thought the mother an alien presence.

"My little darling, why did you stay away from me?"

She strained the child to her until it gasped for breath and struggled away from her arms.

"I was busy," explained the mother, "and she would not come without me. I think she was frightened that day when you were ill."

"Frightened of me? Nonsense!" Then she added suspiciously, "What kept you so busy?"

"I have a lot of preparations to make before I go away to the wedding. . . ."

"Wedding? What wedding? You are keeping secrets from me. You are hiding what is really in your mind. You want to take her away from me because you are jealous of me."

The mother was bewildered: "What do you mean? Why should I be jealous of you? I've always been grateful for the love and happiness you have given my child. I had not expected the marriage to take place so soon, and was quite unprepared. That is why I had so many things to do all at once."

"Whose wedding is it?"

"My brother-in-law's. I shall be gone only a month or two. . . ."

"A month or two! Leave the child with me, please. You know I will look after her well enough. Will you stay with me, my little one?"

The mother laughed and added, "Or will you stay with me?"

The child ran to its mother and put its arms round her neck.

"Come to me, my love. I will give you sweets and toys and pretty clothes."

The child ran to the other merrily. The mother teased, "You greedy little pretender!"

That night she felt the house a shell. It held no laughter, no prattle, no unsteadily swift footsteps. Emptiness was around her and within her. If she screamed her voice would be lost in it and no one would hear her. Just as God did not hear; the Saints did not hear. If she was to live in silence why should others not share it with her? Why should another have what was hers by all the rights of desire and longing and sacrifice? Would it be easy to say "God's will be done" when His will left no hope?

Her head was heavy and throbbed with pain. She knocked it against the wall again and again. She felt the softness of cloth against her aching forehead, and through tear-blinded eyes she saw her husband's 'kurta' hanging on the wall. A flame of fury and hate burned through her. She sprang

up and wrenched the flimsy muslin garment off the peg and tore it in shreds. Her impatient teeth bit and strained at each resisting seam. The frenzy burned in a focus of sizzling green.

The next day the child came without its mother. She dressed her in new clothes that shone like shoots of grass rain-washed. "My pretty one, your mother could not give you these." She gave her a doll that opened and shut its eyes and said *ma-ma* and made the child clap its hands and laugh. "Your mother cannot give you this. What can she give you? Not even love—not love like mine. You are mine, my precious one, my own!"

The child stopped laughing, clutched its doll and puckered up its face with fear of the tear-splashed twisted face so near. It tried to run away and cried out, "Amma! Amma!"

"I am your amma. Don't run away from me." She caught the child and crushed it to her breast. It struggled and whimpered, "Amma! Amma!"

"Sh! Sh! Sh! Don't call her. If she hears you she will come and take you away." She pressed her harder against herself to smother its cry, "Amma! Amma! Amma!" The child struggled desperately. . . .

The doll fell to the ground. Its china head cracked against the hard uncovered floor. The child's struggles ceased.

She held the still form tight, and swaying from side to side cried, "You are mine. You are mine!"