

THE drone of Tarabibi's uninterrupted monologue from within the house penetrated Golzar Ali's ears, created a turmoil in his head, and shattered the calm of his evening.

Today everything had gone so well — all microphones from his shop had been rented for a college function. He had been free to enjoy a long afternoon nap — something he could not do too often and felt fresh and rested. In the evening, he went to Fakir Chand's 'Azad Restaurant'. He was leisurely relishing two well-done barbecued kababs when Asadullah entered the restaurant. Pouring his tea into the saucer and taking it to his lips, Asadullah spoke to Golzar. 'Come on, hurry. I'm tired looking for you all over the place. Let's make a dash to the 'Moon Theatre'.

Golzar stepped out of 'Moon Theatre' in full contentment. He had not enjoyed something like this for a long time. It was an English film. He had not understood the dialogue, but who cares? The blows and the wrestling spoke for everything. Some blows were worth a million taka each. Golzar was not a skilled fighter, but most of his close associates had talents along that line. Nowadays in times of firearms, however, their days were over. Probably their skills had blunted too. But Golzar was fascinated by the power of human hands shown in this film.

As they came on to the main street, Asadullah said, 'Come, let's make a round to 'Gangajali' — let me initiate you today.'

'No, Ustad.'

'Come on, man, you'll just sit and watch, maybe drink a bottle, I'll finish and come back.'

'No, Ustad.'

'What! Go, then, suck your wife's teats,' Asadullah was irritated. 'I couldn't make a man out of you, Golzar.'

Whether Golzar really wanted to become a man or not was doubtful. When Asadullah left, he kept walking straight. He could not help recalling the wrestling scenes — he had seen numerous films about violence and fighting, but this pageantry of blows falling one against another, the repeated confrontations, and just the constant 'thud, thud' of blows surpassed anything he had ever witnessed before. Golzar imagined how he would re-enact those scenes of wrestling in front of Sakina when he went home. Whenever he looked up, he felt as if the sky was covered with a large screen filled with vivid displays of movements by paired hands. Almost overwhelmed by this dance of fists and the 'tock-tock-tock' sound of blows, Golzar reached his house.

The front of the house had a large wooden door framed by a now crumbling thin layer of bricks. The door itself was very old, inordinately heavy, and crammed with cracks. Golzar was about to peer through the usual big crack and call his wife, when Tarabibi's complaining voice reached him.

'You're as good as dead!' she shouted to Ramzan Ali. 'All your life you've just lain in bed, never knowing what worries I have in running this house. What a son have I borne, O Allah! How I face Allah on the Day of Judgment! It's one at night and he isn't back home! I know where he goes and who he fools around with.'

Hearing these words, Golzar felt his merry evening, the dance of blows in the street neons — all dissolving into a haze. He no longer wished to control his life; he yearned to abandon all discretion and conscience to the yellowish black drain under the dark lamp-post by the street.

'Ali Hussain's wife — that shameless hussy — don't I know what all that whispering, murmuring to her is about? Sitting on the high, narrow veranda, the mother who had borne him wove new sentences, each sharper than the former, each revealing a suspicious mind.'

If there's a maid-servant, he must fool around with her all the time: Suruj's mother, bring me water; Suruj's mother where's my vest? Suruj's mother, bring my breakfast — Why? Doesn't he have a wife?

How much more? Putting a hand on his chest, Golzar peered through a crack in the door and called his wife, 'Sakina.' Saying, 'who?' but without waiting for a reply, Sakina came, opened the door but did not linger. Beyond the door were a few yards of grass-patched, muddy, concrete land, and then a high veranda. There was absolute silence in the veranda as Golzar Ali shut the door with his back turned to the veranda. The longer he could spend locking the door, the better. He kept bolting and unbolting the door. The bolting of the door was the only sound in the house right now. When Golzar turned around, he saw that the veranda was empty. Good, the moment of facing his mother had been delayed a little. But the five steps leading up to the veranda were climbed in no time. Then he must enter through a high door and pass Tarabibi before reaching his own room. Tarabibi's room was long. From the dark veranda, her lighted room seemed a hazy yellow. The first thing which struck one on entering it was that far below the high ceiling the area which seemed like an empty hole was actually occupied by Ramzan Ali who tossed and turned his twisted, wooden post-like body on a bed. Often as he turned his eighty-two year old debilitated figure, a gush of unseemly cough burst forth. But nothing like that happened now. Ramzan could not endure light, that is why one side of the lighted bulb was covered with paper. In the opposite corner of the room, Tarabibi sat on a low stool preparing betel-leaf. Golzar almost brushed by

her side before he went to his room. From the bed on the other side, Ramzan Ali's hoarse voice filled the room:

'Did you shut the back door?'  
'Do you have to remind me?' Before Tarabibi had finished her reply, Golzar reached his own room. 'Did you look under the bed?' Before he heard the reply to Ramzan Ali's second question, Golzar quietly closed the door.

In Golzar's room, on a red-bordered mat was a bowl of rice, a bowl of curry, mashed potatoes, and some jalapin peppers and salt in a saucer. Sitting on the mat and eating rice and curry, Golzar said, 'Amma went on and on, didn't she?' Without replying, Sakina put up the mosquito net, arranged the pillows, and straightened the bed-sheet over and again. Sakina's almost fair and round face was overcast. Hoping to spread a little sunshine over that face, Golzar said, 'Why don't you eat a little with me?' Without expecting a reply, he started picking out the bones of the 'khalasa' fish. While doing that he asked, 'Had the fish gone stale?' But the staleness of the fish apparently did not affect his appetite. He went on eating for a long time. His bowed head almost reached his chest. Sakina, who stood by holding the bed-post, looked out of the corner of

Golzar. 'Golzar Bhai, show how your friend snores in his sleep.' Then she herself displayed not only how her husband snored in his sleep, but also how he ate a banana. For the first time in her life, Sakina laughed continuously for a long time. Amidst this laughter, evening fell, and Rabeya put on her burkha and, left with Ali Hussain to go home. Golzar also went outside with them. As soon as they had gone, Tarabibi called Sakina, 'O, Bou! What is all this laughter about?' Remembering Ali Hussain and Rabeya's strange antics, Sakina covered her mouth with the end of her sari and laughed again. 'Amma, that wife is so funny, you cannot help laughing!'

But Tarabibi's face was grim. She was dark, tall and heavy. She had no blouse on, only the sari was wrapped around the chest. She panted in the heat. After a while, Sakina noticed that this panting was not entirely due to the heat — Tarabibi was actually very angry. 'Bou, don't dig a canal and invite the alligator, understand?'

'Huh?'

'Don't you know what a canal is?' Tarabibi could not tolerate any more, 'A village bumpkin... and you don't know what a canal is? You who grew up pissing and sitting beside ditches and canals, and now you don't know a canal.'

them faintly. But the floor creaked and trembled if anyone walked upstairs — that is why since before Golzar's birth no one had lived upstairs. Some of the upper steps of the staircase had crumbled and fallen down, so the way up was closed. Upstairs now are the sole reign of insects and mice. On some nights, the noise of these pests scurrying to and fro came through like a stream of rain. With the fall of this waterless rain and Tarabibi's wailing came Ramzan Ali's short rebukes and Tarabibi's grumbling, and all mingled to form one whole and the thrust of it moved the bed under Golzar's body, the wall around, the mosquito-net and the ceiling to render him absolutely insecure. Golzar's blood and marrow would dry up and his body would become a shadow. There was nothing around his body, just shadows. Above was the mosquito-net, the shadow of the ceiling on the net, on the side — the wall and the shadow of emptiness, the shadow of night and darkness and when all these shadows had full control over Golzar, he fell asleep once again. On other nights, the rough, prickly voice of Tarabibi would wake him and after a while he would realise that Tarabibi was trying to awaken Ramzan Ali.

'O Golzar's father! You lie there like a corpse! O old man, even the lifeless bed creaks, but there's no movement in you as you lie sprawled all over! Either Ramzan Ali would keep silent, or he would take up the hand fan by his pillow and start beating his wife: 'Brazen hag, you are lustful for manliness! Wait! I'll show you manliness. Come, I'll satisfy your lust!'

Before his words could form properly in his toothless mouth and sleepy voice, they faded and his bony hands drooped in fatigue. Even then he was above sixty-five. He worked hard the whole day. They had no tenants upstairs now, they did not have any money for repairs. His only brother Moharram Ali had taken possession of their inherited 'Arzu Decorators'. Now his only asset was a mike shop — renting mikes and records was profitable enough, but now-a-days you needed publicity to gain customers. How could Ramzan Ali's health sustain? At times Golzar would feel angry — why did Ramzan Ali have to remarry a such an old aged even though his wife died? Tarabibi was Ramzan Ali's second wife, she had been a sister-in-law of some sort to him. The daughters by the first wife still called Tarabibi 'aunt'. The three sons of those daughters, who were all older than Golzar, two being born before Tarabibi's marriage, often teased him. 'O Uncle, when grandpa married again, he was already sixty years old. The old man must have a great deal of trouble handling a twenty-five year old woman. Isn't it a lot of hard work for the old man?' Ramzan Ali would not have had to suffer like this at night if he had not married again. Late at night, when Tarabibi would chant in her shrill, cracked voice, 'O old dead log! Have you already crept inside your grave? Wait, let me say a prayer for you, if you go in without a funeral, won't you be damned?' — Golzar's heart would break in pieces. If his father had not remarried in old age, he would never be born into this world. His father had done him grave injustice by not allowing him the joy of not being born. He could not even imagine that the condition of non-existence, but bitterly regretted being deprived of that prospect. At this moment though lying beside his wife, Golzar no longer desired that destiny of never being in existence. Rather, putting his hand on Sakina's wet back, he felt the womanly smell of sweat tickling into the lines of his hand and he fell asleep.

The next day, before leaving for his shop, Golzar told his mother, 'Amma, your bou probably misunderstood whatever you told her yesterday and cried all through the night.'

'What did I say?' Tarabibi was hanging clothes on the rope in the veranda. Without stopping her work, she said, 'What is there to cry about?'

'With Ali Hussain's wife... 'While Golzar thought how he should goon, Tarabibi spread out a sheet, and then rescued her son, saying, 'I said that his wife is shameless. Didn't you see how she flirts with other men? There was a talk of your marriage with her.'

'What, you never told me about that?'

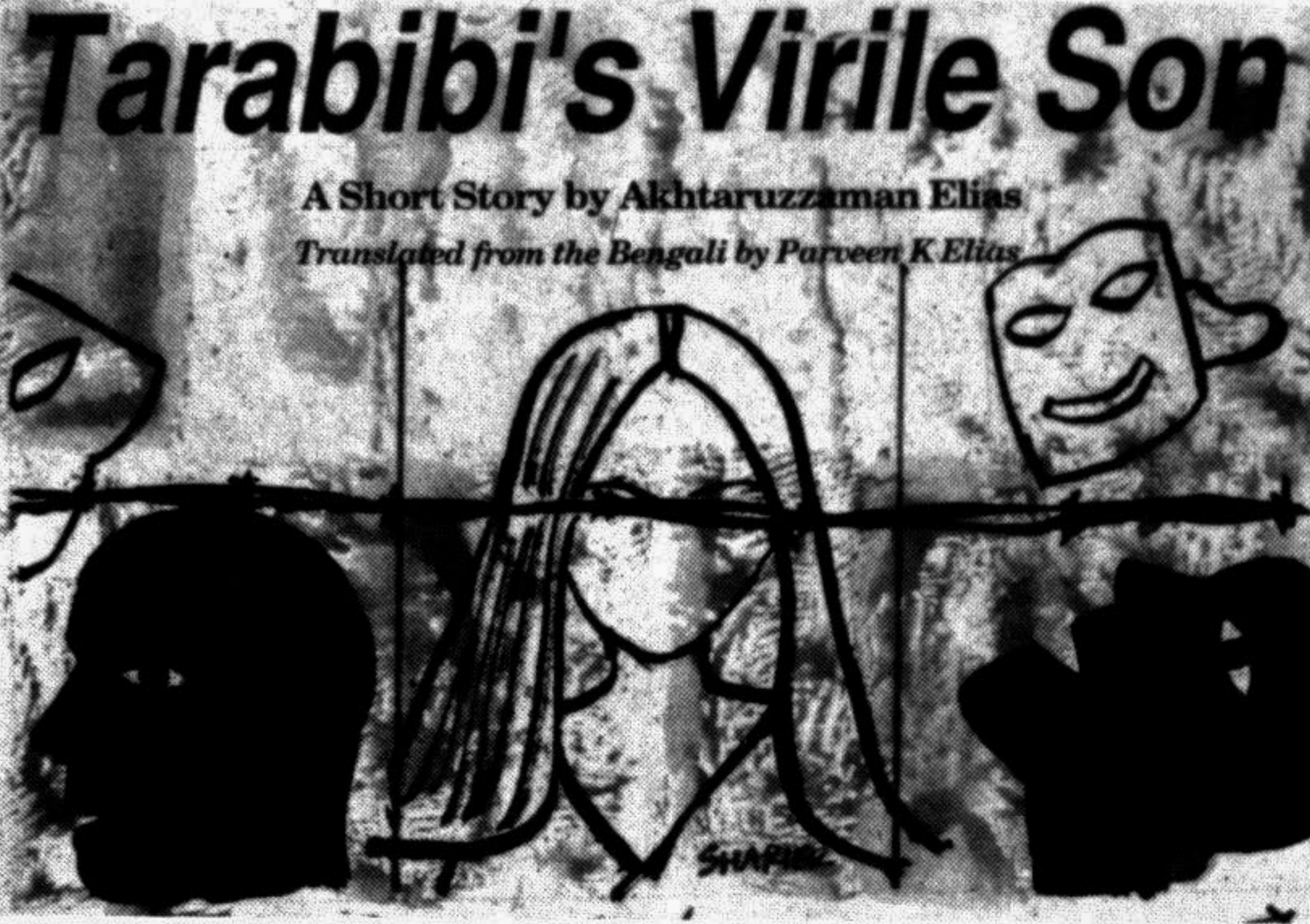
'Why, don't you know? Crazy Khadem's brother had asked your father many times. There was even talk of sending a proposal.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Why? Didn't you go in and out of Crazy Khadem's house?' Golzar was not only ashamed to hear such a remark from his mother, but also turned pale when he noticed Sakina standing nearby holding the door. Golzar and Rabeya had lived in the same lane and played together in childhood — all this was true. But after growing up it was doubtful whether they saw each other even once in six months. Actually, it was Tarabibi who sent Golzar to call Rabeya when she needed help in sewing or in making pickles and preserves. As he grew older, Golzar himself would feel shy and hesitate to go inside their house, and preferred to convey his mother's message through Rabeya's brother. Tarabibi would often fuss and get angry at this feminine shyness of Golzar. And now it was Tarabibi who said, 'We thought you were the one who told her uncle to speak to your father.'

'No, Amma, I don't know anything at all.'

Saying 'Huh,' Tarabibi started for the water-well.



her eyes. Had Golzar fallen asleep or what? Tarabibi had started her incessant monotone while folding her prayers mat after Maghrib the prayers, and it had stopped only now. Oh, Allah! What a long speech it had been! When the rumbling noise of the buses playing on the main street had decreased, the microphone playing popular melodies in the restaurant around the corner blared even louder. The loud music together with the continued shrieks of madman Khadem in No.11 and above all the hubbub of the noisy, bustling, busy area — all had mingled in muddled confusion.

Golzar said, 'Amma made quite a scene, huh?'

'Did Amma say anything to you too? he asked again.'

'Take me away to Mir Khadem, Or, else call Mia Bhai to come and get me.'

Even though he had finished eating, Golzar fiddled with a few grains of rice. Sakina said, 'I don't like this at all. How much more can I take of this?'

Sakina's words aroused a faint resentment in Golzar's heart: he was the one most victimised by his mother's behavior, but even his wife refused to share his suffering. This reaction helped him recover from his passivity. He pulled out the basin from under the bed, washed his hands and mouth, gargled and cleaned his throat, then sat on the bed dangling his feet and took the betel leaf from Sakina's hand. Sakina gathered and piled the dirty dishes in a corner. While doing this she muttered in a low and bitter voice: 'We're mere village girls, coming from low class families. How is it possible for me to hold on to a husband from a noble family like yours?'

Through Golzar Ali had no regrets that Sakina was a peasant girl, he could not find any fault in his mother's accusation either. But he did not want to displease his wife. Maybe, he could still salvage his evening with some effort.

'Why must you hold on to me? Have I left you? Couldn't you say that?'

'What could I say?'

How could Sakina say anything to her mother-in-law? Golzar Ali had told Sakina a long time ago that being suspicious was part of his mother's nature. Sakina's first experience had occurred three months after marriage. One day, in this very room, Golzar, Sakina, Golzar's friend Ali Hussain and his wife Rabeya had spent the whole afternoon gossiping and merry making. Ali Hussain and his wife were both lively company. Ali Hussain was a master of mimicry — he could imitate a stammering man, an infant crying, the sounds of cats and dogs, even the sound of a cork being extracted from a bottle, or the sound of water being poured from an earthen jar — he could imitate everything. Rabeya was also a very jolly person. Once she interrupted Ali Hussain and told

him, 'After humiliating her with these irrelevant remarks, Tarabibi came to the actual point. 'Do you know that shameless hussy?'

'Ali Hussain Bhai's wife?'

'You don't have to tell me who she is. Don't I know madman Khadem's daughter? Khadem madman tried so hard to trap my Golzar for her! Golzar's eyes were in that direction too. Look, Bou, don't ruin yourself. Didn't you see how she laughed with another man, didn't you see?'

That night was very bad one for Golzar. Sakina kept silent and did not respond at all. When Golzar pulled her down on the bed and kissed her for a long time, Sakina started crying. In between sobs, in snatched phrases, Sakina related her first sorrowful experience in married life.

'Is this how you will take care of my future? My father had given me in marriage with a lot of hopes, what is all this you're doing?'

In between Sakina's lamentations, Golzar asked her, 'Did Amma tell you all this?'

'Yes.'

'Who knows what Amma said and what you made up understood?'

But this had no effect. Late at night, Golzar woke up and saw that Sakina was sobbing, sometimes hiding her face in the pillow and sometimes sitting up and putting her face between her knees. When she saw him awaken, she turned and lay facing the other side. Her back was heaving — the sari did not cover her back and her blouse was sticky with sweat. As he lay looking, suddenly a continuous sound entered his ears and flung his body out of bed in a single leap. The sound of Tarabibi weeping had crept through the wall and door into this room. When Golzar tiptoed to the other end of the room and quietly opened the door, that sound burst in. Tarabibi was fast asleep — the rhythmic fluctuations of her snores were transformed into a continuous wail by the time they reached this room. Golzar closed the door and lay down again. The sound of Tarabibi's imposed upon the emptiness of the room. Golzar's late childhood, boyhood, and even early youth had been interspersed with Tarabibi's crying. By that time the sobbing of Sakina lying beside him had calmed down a little. Golzar was afraid whether the rest of his life would also be marked by somebody weeping. Putting his hand on Sakina's wet back, Golzar's fear somewhat subsided. There was a woman of flesh and blood, full of joys and sorrows lying beside him. Before there had been only a dirty green sheet on a thin mattress. Above was a high ceiling beneath which was this awkward, cave-like room. There were rooms above that ceiling before. At a very young age, Golzar Ali had seen them and recalled

## Will He Come

by Helal Kabir Chowdhury

Scores of pedants' naive prescriptions to varied problems of Sonar Bangla — yet to get rid of its birth pangs. It groans now and may be for years to come

They tried to offer a panacea. Expectedly, the result is a negation. Countless slogans, processions, picketing ended in nothingness.

Assassins are within and outside to throttle the ventures of the genuine souls. They grow in figures, they multiply exploitation. All here burn under sun to get a loaf of bread to leave through. This even is hammered into pieces by the Frankenstein.

Ali Miah was martyred one morning; many rebels born on that day. They will not forgive the assassins. A clarion call is sought, a call to move forward. Something more is needed. One in the form of a messiah. Will he come to combat the savage?

This poem was composed in memory of Nur Hussain, a youngman who was gunned down by police in 1987 while in a procession during the mass upsurge against the autocratic regime of ousted President Ershad.

## A Dreamwashed Telegram

by Azfar Hussain

You send whatever you want to, to the street damn sure, I'd get it, a verse, I'd a syllable, I'd a promise, I'd

I'd not, damn sure, dear, turn to I no, street, the one closed off right on my rib —

I is no, I can tell, can I.

We have streets under the sky, but not the one that would tell where I am.

'Wobbly,' you said, mincing words, the sunrise like a soap washes off stains from our faces.

I've a document of pains I cannot share, a country with borderlines missing.

When shall I turn, now tell, toward you for a word lost three thousand moons ago

near the no signed by hunger

## If You Accompany Me

by Lili Haque

My sweet country my love, Journey from Dhaka to Mymensingh I see from the compartment of a running train Shy face of a farmer's wife, I see your face in green rice field How it is to walk in shadow of deep forest And if you accompany me? See, see that tender aged girl is plastering her mud house The sky seems very nice I see orchard of mango and jackfruit trees Nurished peak of pumpkin and gourd ceiling See, that net held in the hand of a fisherman I wonder and see. How I am caught in the net of your love It seems to me, you are seated beside me And saying 'Are you feeling pain in hand For writing continuously Do let me complete your unfinished writings.'

EARLY in the last quarter of the past century, a 12-year-old girl — carefully protected within the cocoon of her family and its lofty social milieu — began to write verses and stories as an outgrowth of her voracious appetite for reading, and, not incidentally, as a way of expanding her rather limited horizons.

Edith Newbold Jones' world revolved around proper, hoary New York and East Coast society, populated by merchants, lawyers and bankers with roots in the American soil harking back to the colonial era. For the most part, it did not embrace culture — specifically the arts or literature.

Fiction, in effect, caused friction. And so, as she matured and continued to write, Edith (using her married name, Wharton) explored, in evocative stories written over four decades, these conflicting pressures of conforming with her cloistered world and rebelling against it that challenged her so relentlessly in her actual existence.

'Her tragic heroines and heroes,' critic Edmund Wilson noted, explaining her oeuvre, 'are passionate or imaginative spirits, hungry for emotional

## Edith Wharton Exemplifies Richness of American Literature

and intellectual experience, who find themselves locked into a small, closed system, and either destroy themselves by beating their heads against their prison or suffer a living death in resigning themselves to it.'

As the novelist herself put it in her 1925 collection of critical essays, 'The Writing of Fiction,' 'drama, situation, is made out of the conflicts, thus produced between social order and individual appetites, and the art of rendering life in fiction can never, in the last analysis, be anything, or need to be anything, but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence.'

Always crucial, she stressed, must be 'some moral standard, some explicit awareness of the eternal struggle between man's contending impulses, if the tales embodying them are to fix the attention and hold the memory.'

Edith's father, George Frederic Jones, a descendant of several generations of merchant ship-owners going back to the Dutch presence in New Amsterdam (later New York),

and her mother, whose ancestors fought in various major campaigns of the Revolutionary War looked askance at their daughter's passion.

They viewed it as an eccentricity, and later even ignored her successes with it. 'The subject was avoided as if it were a kind of family disgrace,' Wharton reminisced in 'A Backward Glance,' her 1934 memoir. Even Edith's initial suitor was reported in the press to have backed out of the relationship because she was 'an ambitious authoress.'

Shortly before her death at 75 in 1937, Wharton recalled those biases and voids of the world of her childhood, lamenting 'how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone facades' of her homes, and recalling massive libraries containing shelves filled with books, most of which went unread.

At the same time, the world of letters was, to a great extent, a world of men. To be sure, there were women who had established niches for themselves in the arts —

mostly as poets.

But female novelists were not the norm. Wharton, through her nine novels and novellas and more than seven dozen short stories, righted the balance somewhat. In time, she became the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate (in literature) from Yale University, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (for 'The Age of Innocence,' although Wharton believed Sinclair Lewis was more deserving of the award for Babbitt) and the prestigious gold medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Despite these triumphs, her life was relatively somber, filled with angst that mirrored itself in her writings. Having escaped her claustrophobic household at 23 by marrying Edward Robbins (Teddy) Wharton, a privileged Boston banker more than 10 years her senior, Edith soon discovered the pitfalls of that new relationship. The two were pleasant companions, but Teddy — who was not a healthy man — also was no intellectual match for her. Only travel abroad energized them as a couple. At

home, they lived in New York, Rhode Island and western Massachusetts.

The rapidity of her life and the burden of responsibility she bore for monitoring Teddy triggered in her a series of breakdowns, first mental, then physical. To counter the effects, Edith collaborated with a friend on a book, 'The Decoration of Houses,' that reflected her desire to unshackle homemakers from the rather uninspired design motifs that were the norm around the turn of the century. Edmund Wilson, according to novelist-critic Louis Auchincloss, termed her the poet of interior decoration.

months, and plans for other film adaptations continue to surface.

The James connection is intriguing. Edith first had encountered the older writer in Europe, during her teens, while travelling with her parents. Beginning as teacher or adviser and student, they soon became close friends and equals. And critics such as Fred Lewis Pattee have tended to link the two as 'trained in the school of' Honore de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert and M. H. Stendahl. Both, Pattee said, 'must be classed as intellectual, concerned fundamentally with form, with manners, with art.'

In 'The Writing of Fiction,' Wharton further outlined the bond, focusing on what she had elicited from James — notably an interest in the relationship between the rules of society and individual freedom — wealthy citizens and Americans overseas in particular. This linkage aside, however, her characters and her technique were more distinctive. As Auchincloss has observed, 'her sentences never have to be read and reread, like James', for richer and deeper disclosures.'

As evidence of that rediscovered popularity, there is the fact that two movies based on her work — 'The Age of Innocence' and 'Ethan Frome' — have been released in recent