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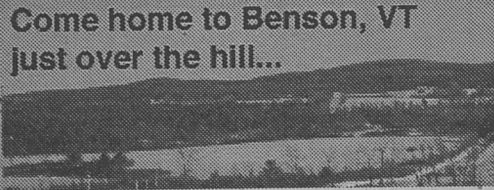



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Women Like That: Vita and Virginia

“These Sapphists love women,” Virginia Woolf wrote in December of 1925. She had just spent a few days alone with her friend Vita Sackville-West at Vita’s home, Long Barn. “I liked her and being with her ...”

They had first met three years earlier when Virginia’s brother-in-law, Clive Bell, invited Vita to dinner expressly to be introduced to Virginia. Virginia was already a well-known writer and had enough of a reputation for eccentricity that Vita’s husband, Harold Nicolson, asked, “Did she look very mad?”

The attraction between them was immediate, but Vita was a busy woman. She was married, had two young sons, a large house and garden to manage and any number of other love affairs in various stages of passion.

“Not much to my severer taste,” Virginia wrote in her diary the day after Clive’s dinner, “—florid, mustached, parakeet-colored ... hard, handsome, manly; inclined to a double chin.” Vita was tall, dark and handsome, strong and full of vitality, dashing and exotic.

Vita’s entire life was colored by the loss of her childhood home, Knole. It is a huge, sprawling house built in the Middle Ages and given to Thomas Sackville by Queen Elizabeth I in 1566. The house was restored in 1603 and remains unaltered. Vita was enormously attached to the house, its grounds and garden, but according to the English laws of inheritance, only a male heir could succeed to the estate and the title that went with it. It went to a male cousin, and Vita never reconciled its loss.

Vita was one who dug her hands deep into the dirt, literally and figuratively; she is almost better known for her gardens than for her books. Virginia tended to distance herself from her physical life with intellectual analysis of the world. Vita was beguiled by the enigmatic Virginia, writing, “... do you just enjoy baffling people who try to creep closer to you?” They had known each other for a year and a half, and Vita was answering a letter in which Virginia had suggested that their friendship had reached the first stage of intimacy.

Virginia and her husband Leonard were part of a group of artists and writers known as the Bloomsbury Group. Her sister, Vanessa Bell, became known for her decorative painting. But the

francesca susanna

Bloomsburys were doubtful of Vita’s artistic integrity (her books tended to sell pretty well). After Vita and Harold dined with Virginia and her friends one day early in the friendship Virginia wrote, “We judged them incurably stupid. He is bluff, but oh so obvious; she, Duncan thought, took the cure

that wants Virginia,” Vita wrote. “You have broken down my defences.” She returned to England for the summer of 1926 on pretext of looking after her ageing and ill mother, but the visit extended until February.

Vita and Harold had what was termed — even then — an open marriage. They were passionately devoted to one another, their sons, and their life and gardens at Long Barn. Vita had her female (and once in a while, male) lovers, Harold had his male lovers, but they never forgot each other and deeply loved each other.

Nonetheless, Harold always grew nervous and jealous whenever it looked like Vita was falling in love with someone,

Virginia tended to distance herself from her physical life with intellectual analysis of the world. Vita was beguiled by the enigmatic Virginia.

from him and had nothing free to say ... It was a rocky steep evening.” Vita described the Woolfs as “plain living and high thinking.”

In 1925 Harold Nicolson was sent to Tehran by the British government on a diplomatic mission. It was Vita’s imminent departure for Persia that occasioned ‘the moment of intimacy’ at Long Barn and Virginia’s observation about Sapphists. With Virginia, the mention may or may not indicate physical intimacy. She did not have sexual relations with Leonard, and of her own sexual activities she said, “My terror of real life has always kept me in a nunnery.” The moment of intimacy likely was emotional and intellectual.

Vita’s departure for Tehran excited a passionate exchange of letters between the two women, full of longing and desire. “I am reduced to a thing

and it seemed to him that Vita was not really in England for her mother’s sake as much as for Virginia’s. Vita wrote to reassure him, “[my] love for Virginia is a mental thing, a spiritual thing ... an intellectual thing.” Perhaps what Harold disliked, or what Vita thought he disliked, was the physical relationships. Vita’s affairs did tend to cause strife and scandal between her lovers and their spouses.

Vita told him that she was “scared to death of arousing physical feelings in [Virginia], because of the madness.” Vita did admit to going to bed with her twice, and after a night spent together she recorded in her diary simply, “(!).”

Vita and Virginia formed an intense closeness that summer, growing more and more intimate. They visited Vita’s much-loved Knole together. When Vita finally returned to Persia in February of 1927, it