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A woman of substance

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SOMETIMES it has been difficult to distinguish between the life of Jemima Khan and a particularly unsubtle beach novel. Even her birth raised eyebrows. Jemima was the first child of an affair between 62-year-old entrepreneur Sir James Goldsmith and Lady Annabel Birley, of 'swinging' club Annabel's fame, when both were married to other people.

As a child, she and her brothers divided their time between a mansion beside Richmond Park, a Burgundy chateau and Mexican palacio, while her father divided himself between his wife and his long time French mistress. By the age of 13, Jemima was gaining fame as a show jumper, qualifying with her pony for the 1987 Horse of the Year Show.

As a teenager she was notoriously tempestuous. One of her former escorts, chocolate heir Joel Cadbury, was the injured party after they had a heated argument while driving. She threw him and his suitcases out on to the M25, leaving him to ring his mother to ask to be collected.

For her 20th birthday, her father hired a jazz band and flew 100 of her friends to Paris for a party, at a cost of around £250,000.

A year later she was swept off her feet by Imran Khan, and gave up both her studies at Bristol University and her plunging necklines. They met at a dinner party. She was the daughter of Britain's seventh richest man; he was the playboy cricketer with arrogant good looks and a string of glamorous girlfriends, including Goldie Hawn, Stephanie Beacham, Susannah Constantine (the former girlfriend of Lord Linley who became What Not To Wear's fashion nag), as well as Emma Sergeant, an artist friend of Prince Charles and half of London's socialite set.

The whirlwind romance and engagement with Khan took everyone by surprise - especially Imran's two-timed girlfriend Kristiane Backer, who was only told of the wedding plans hours after they were made public. Jemima's friends and relatives also raised objections, including her father, who apparently "blew a gasket". (He later, so Jemima says, became as enamoured of Imran as his daughter, although this didn't stop him referring to his son-in-law as "a wonderful first husband".)

The Pakistani press saw the match as an international plot to destroy Islamic culture. The wedding was a two-minute ceremony (in Urdu) in Paris, with a civil ceremony in England and a reception at Goldsmith's opulent Surrey home. Life for Jemima after the wedding was like Cinderella in reverse. At a stroke, her life of nightclubs, parties and designer frocks vanished.

The bride converted to Islam soon after the wedding, changing her name to Jamila Haiqa, then moved to Pakistan, where her husband was trying to turn his standing as a national hero into political capital. Fortunately she did not have to convert to cricket: "I am bored by cricket and mercifully met Imran long after his career was over," she said. "Frankly, I wouldn't know the difference between a fast bowler and a slow one."

However, she was supportive of his political ambitions and his party, the Movement for Justice, to the extent that she campaigned at women's gatherings when their first son Suleiman was six weeks old.

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A second son, Qasim, was born in 1999. Jemima learnt Urdu and Pushtu, dressed in traditional Pakistani costume and accustomed herself to living without money. Imran, who poured all his money into politics and building a cancer hospital in memory of his mother, refused to accept financial help from the Goldsmiths. In 2000, Vanity Fair sent a reporter to interview Jemima at her home, and the water, electricity and overcrowding problems haunted the interviewer. "Jemima doesn't even have a washing machine," she wrote, aghast.

"Struggle is good for you," Imran said piously. "If people avoid struggle they decay. Life has been very easy for Jemima. Maybe I'm a godsend to make her struggle." And struggle she did. She and her sons endured various health problems. At one time she was living on chocolates brought from Britain and pomegranate juice, and spent an enormous amount of time alone with her sons while Imran spent his on hospital visits, political meetings and going to the gym. "The older Imran gets, the more Pakistani he becomes," admitted Jemima. "He's moving closer to his roots. It doesn't dismay me."

She learnt to walk behind her husband and accepted there would be no affection between them in public. Privately, theirs was a passionate marriage, at least for the first few years. By the turn of the millennium, however, there were rumours that relations were becoming strained to the point that, in the famously ill-advised style of Cindy Crawford and Richard Gere, Jemima placed an advertisement in the country's national newspapers in an attempt to silence gossip. However, her husband continued to fuel rumours with a radio interview in which he said cross-cultural marriages could be "disastrous" and "extremely difficult".

During a flight to Pakistan, passengers noticed Imran was abrupt with her when she was upset by turbulence. While her husband was in the toilet, she wrote him a note: "I love you, so please be a bit happy." What made his indifference all the more chilling is the fact that his wife is phobic about flying since an incident in which she, her brother Ben, her mother and two sons were on a BA flight to Nairobi when a mentally ill passenger ran into the cockpit and forced the plane to plunge 10,000ft before he was overpowered. Many compared the relationship between the blonde rich waif and her distant older husband with the ill-starred match of Diana and Charles. Both Diana and Jemima married at a young, impressionable age to men who decided their brides "fitted the bill" as virginal sweet young things. Both had to embrace a different lifestyle and, like Diana, Jemima outstripped her husband's popularity, which upset his vanity, especially since Imran now finds himself at something of a professional crossroads.

He had long considered it his destiny to be the next president of Pakistan, but latterly his political career has faltered. Jemima, however, has considerably more tact and brain cells at her disposal than Diana. While at home with her first son, she set up a fashion business until the events of September 11 pushed this out of favour. She also threw herself into charity work, raising money for Afghan refugees in camps near the Pakistani border, works as a special representative for Unicef UK and completed her Bristol degree by post.

Jemima is now studying for a masters degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and numerous articles she has written demonstrate a precise, agile mind. It was also Jemima who engineered the conciliation between Imran and Sita White, mother of Imran's daughter Tyrian, whose paternity he had refused to acknowledge for years. White had initially detested Jemima, but by the time of her death in May, was so won over that she named the Khans as Tyrian's legal guardians.

Increasingly Jemima stayed in the UK a touch too often for a devout resident in Pakistan. Guests at her 30th birthday party in January included blue chip aristocrats and court jesters such as Jools Holland, Steve Coogan and Hugh Grant - while Imran stayed in Pakistan. The couple's divorce

announcement last week follows in the wake of much innuendo surrounding her dining partners AA Gill and Hugh Grant, although both men are long-standing friends through Jemima's London set.

Imran's appeal to Jemima, according to her sister, was that, unlike her father, he appeared to possess basic moral certainties, and that was the one thing Jemima hadn't grown up with. Eventually, however, came the realisation that she had simply swapped one egocentric, controlling figure for another. After that, it was only a matter of time before the Khan marriage, an impossibly optimistic attempt to cross gulfs of age, interests and cultures, reached its final chapter.

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