

THE WELL OF LONELINESS

By RADCLYFFE HALL

with a commentary by
HAVELOCK ELLIS

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By the same Author

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ADAM'S BREED

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By RADCLYFFE HALL

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Dedicated to
OUR THREE SELVES

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COMMENTARY

I HAVE read *The Well of Loneliness* with great interest because – apart from its fine qualities as a novel by a writer of accomplished art – it possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance. So far as I know, it is the first English novel which presents, in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us to-day. The relation of certain people – who while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and the finest aptitudes – to the often hostile society in which they move, presents difficult and still unsolved problems. The poignant situations which thus arise are here set forth so vividly, and yet with such complete absence of offence, that we must place Radclyffe Hall's book on a high level of distinction.

HAVELOCK ELLIS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ALL the characters in this book are purely imaginary, and if the author in any instance has used names that may suggest a reference to living persons, she has done so inadvertently.

A motor ambulance unit of British women drivers did very fine service upon the Allied front in France during the later months of the war, but although the unit mentioned in this book, of which Stephen Gordon becomes a member, operates in much the same area, it has never had any existence save in the author's imagination.

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

I

NOT VERY far from Upton-on-Severn – between it, in fact, and the Malvern Hills – stands the country seat of the Gordons of Bramley; well-timbered, well-cottaged, well-fenced and well-watered, having, in this latter respect, a stream that forks in exactly the right position to feed two large lakes in the grounds.

The house itself is of Georgian red brick, with charming circular windows near the roof. It has dignity and pride without ostentation, self-assurance without arrogance, repose without inertia; and a gentle aloofness that, to those who know its spirit, but adds to its value as a home. It is indeed like certain lovely women who, now old, belong to a bygone generation – women who in youth were passionate but seemly; difficult to win but when won, all-fulfilling. They are passing away, but their homesteads remain, and such an homestead is Morton.

To Morton Hall came the Lady Anna Gordon as a bride of just over twenty. She was lovely as only an Irish woman can be, having that in her bearing that betokened quiet pride, having that in her eyes that betokened great longing, having that in her body that betokened happy promise – the archetype of the very perfect woman, whom creating God has found good. Sir Philip had met her away in County Clare – Anna Molloy, the slim virgin thing, all chastity, and his weariness had flown to her bosom as a spent bird will fly to its nest – as indeed such a bird had once flown to her, she told him, taking refuge from the perils of a storm.

Sir Philip was a tall man and exceedingly well-favoured, but his charm lay less in feature than in a certain wide expression, a tolerant expression that might almost be called noble, and in something sad yet gallant in his deep-set hazel eyes. His chin,

which was firm, was very slightly cleft, his forehead intellectual, his hair tinged with auburn. His wide-nostrilled nose was indicative of temper, but his lips were well-modelled and sensitive and ardent – they revealed him as a dreamer and a lover.

Twenty-nine when they had married, he had sown no few wild oats, yet Anna's true instinct made her trust him completely. Her guardian had disliked him, opposing the engagement, but in the end she had had her own way. And as things turned out her choice had been happy, for seldom had two people loved more than they did; they loved with an ardour undiminished by time; as they ripened, so their love ripened with them.

Sir Philip never knew how much he longed for a son until, some ten years after marriage, his wife conceived a child; then he knew that this thing meant complete fulfilment, the fulfilment for which they had both been waiting. When she told him, he could not find words for expression, and must just turn and weep on her shoulder. It never seemed to cross his mind for a moment that Anna might very well give him a daughter; he saw her only as a mother of sons, nor could her warnings disturb him. He christened the unborn infant Stephen, because he admired the pluck of that Saint. He was not a religious man by instinct, being perhaps too much of a student, but he read the Bible for its fine literature, and Stephen had gripped his imagination. Thus he often discussed the future of their child: 'I think I shall put Stephen down for Harrow,' or: 'I'd rather like Stephen to finish off abroad, it widens one's outlook on life.'

And listening to him, Anna also grew convinced; his certainty wore down her vague misgivings, and she saw herself playing with this little Stephen, in the nursery, in the garden, in the sweet-smelling meadows. 'And himself the lovely young man,' she would say, thinking of the soft Irish speech of her peasants: 'And himself with the light of the stars in his eyes, and the courage of a lion in his heart!'

When the child stirred within her she would think it stirred

strongly because of the gallant male creature she was hiding; then her spirit grew large with a mighty new courage, because a man-child would be born. She would sit with her needle-work dropped on her knees, while her eyes turned away to the long line of hills that stretched beyond the Severn valley. From her favourite seat underneath an old cedar, she would see these Malvern Hills in their beauty, and their swelling slopes seemed to hold a new meaning. They were like pregnant women, full-bosomed, courageous, great green-girdled mothers of splendid sons! Thus through all those summer months, she sat and watched the hills, and Sir Philip would sit with her – they would sit hand in hand. And because she felt grateful she gave much to the poor, and Sir Philip went to church, which was seldom his custom, and the Vicar came to dinner, and just towards the end many matrons called to give good advice to Anna.

But: 'Man proposes – God disposes,' and so it happened that on Christmas Eve, Anna Gordon was delivered of a daughter; a narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a baby, that yelled and yelled for three hours without ceasing, as though outraged to find itself ejected into life.

2

ANNA GORDON held her child to her breast, but she grieved while it drank, because of her man who had longed so much for a son. And seeing her grief, Sir Philip hid his chagrin, and he fondled the baby and examined its fingers.

'What a hand!' he would say. 'Why it's actually got nails on all its ten fingers: little, perfect, pink nails!'

Then Anna would dry her eyes and caress it, kissing the tiny hand.

He insisted on calling the infant Stephen, nay more, he would have it baptized by that name. 'We've called her Stephen so long,' he told Anna, 'that I really can't see why we shouldn't go on –'

Anna felt doubtful, but Sir Philip was stubborn, as he could be at times over whims.

The Vicar said that it was rather unusual, so to mollify him they must add female names. The child was baptized in the village church as Stephen Mary Olivia Gertrude – and she throve, seeming strong, and when her hair grew it was seen to be auburn like Sir Philip's. There was also a tiny cleft in her chin, so small just at first that it looked like a shadow; and after a while when her eyes lost the blueness that is proper to puppies and other young things, Anna saw that her eyes were going to be hazel – and thought that their expression was her father's. On the whole she was quite a well-behaved baby, owing, no doubt, to a fine constitution. Beyond that first energetic protest at birth she had done very little howling.

It was happy to have a baby at Morton, and the old house seemed to become more mellow as the child, growing fast now and learning to walk, staggered or stumbled or sprawled on the floors that had long known the ways of children. Sir Philip would come home all muddy from hunting and would rush into the nursery before pulling off his boots, then down he would go on his hands and knees while Stephen clambered on to his back. Sir Philip would pretend to be well corned up; bucking and jumping and kicking wildly, so that Stephen must cling to his hair or his collar, and thump him with hard little arrogant fists. Anna, attracted by the outlandish hubbub, would find them, and would point to the mud on the carpet.

She would say: 'Now, Philip, now, Stephen, that's enough! It's time for your tea,' as though both of them were children. Then Sir Philip would reach up and disentangle Stephen, after which he would kiss Stephen's mother.

3

THE SON that they waited for seemed long a-coming; he had not arrived when Stephen was seven. Nor had Anna produced other female offspring. Thus Stephen remained cock of the

roost. It is doubtful if any only child is to be envied, for the only child is bound to become introspective; having no one of its own ilk in whom to confide, it is apt to confide in itself. It cannot be said that at seven years old the mind is beset by serious problems, but nevertheless it is already groping, may already be subject to small fits of dejection, may already be struggling to get a grip on life – on the limited life of its surroundings. At seven there are miniature loves and hatreds, which, however, loom large and are extremely disconcerting. There may even be present a dim sense of frustration, and Stephen was often conscious of this sense, though she could not have put it into words. To cope with it, however, she would give way at times to sudden fits of hot temper, working herself up over everyday trifles that usually left her cold. It relieved her to stamp and then burst into tears at the first sign of opposition. After such outbreaks she would feel much more cheerful, would find it almost easy to be docile and obedient. In some vague, childish way she had hit back at life, and this fact had restored her self-respect.

Anna would send for her turbulent offspring and would say: 'Stephen darling, Mother's not really cross – tell Mother what makes you give way to these tempers; she'll promise to try to understand if you'll tell her –'

But her eyes would look cold, though her voice might be gentle, and her hand when it fondled would be tentative, unwilling. The hand would be making an effort to fondle, and Stephen would be conscious of that effort. Then looking up at the calm, lovely face, Stephen would be filled with a sudden contrition, with a sudden deep sense of her own shortcomings; she would long to blurt all this out to her mother, yet would stand there tongue-tied, saying nothing at all. For these two were strangely shy with each other – it was almost grotesque, this shyness of theirs, as existing between mother and child. Anna would feel it, and through her Stephen, young as she was, would become conscious of it; so that they held a little aloof when they should have been drawing together.

Stephen, acutely responsive to beauty, would be dimly longing to find expression for a feeling almost amounting to worship, that her mother's face had awakened. But Anna, looking gravely at her daughter, noting the plentiful auburn hair, the brave hazel eyes that were so like her father's, as indeed were the child's whole expression and bearing, would be filled with a sudden antagonism that came very near to anger.

She would awake at night and ponder this thing, scourging herself in an access of contrition; accusing herself of hardness of spirit, of being an unnatural mother. Sometimes she would shed slow, miserable tears, remembering the inarticulate Stephen.

She would think: 'I ought to be proud of the likeness, proud and happy and glad when I see it!' Then back would come flooding that queer antagonism that amounted almost to anger.

It would seem to Anna that she must be going mad, for this likeness to her husband would strike her as an outrage – as though the poor, innocent seven-year-old Stephen were in some way a caricature of Sir Philip; a blemished, unworthy, maimed reproduction – yet she knew that the child was handsome. But now there were times when the child's soft flesh would be almost distasteful to her; when she hated the way Stephen moved or stood still, hated a certain largeness about her, a certain crude lack of grace in her movements, a certain unconscious defiance. Then the mother's mind would slip back to the days when this creature had clung to her breast, forcing her to love it by its own utter weakness; and at this thought her eyes must fill again, for she came of a race of devoted mothers. The thing had crept on her like a foe in the dark – it had been slow, insidious, deadly; it had waxed strong as Stephen herself had waxed strong, being part, in some way, of Stephen.

Restlessly tossing from side to side, Anna Gordon would pray for enlightenment and guidance; would pray that her husband might never suspect her feelings towards his child. All that she was and had been he knew; in all the world she had no other secret save this one most unnatural and monstrous injustice that was stronger than her will to destroy it. And Sir Philip loved

Stephen, he idolized her; it was almost as though he divined by instinct that his daughter was being secretly defrauded, was bearing some unmerited burden. He never spoke to his wife of these things, yet watching them together, she grew daily more certain that his love for the child held an element in it that was closely akin to pity.

AT ABOUT this time Stephen first became conscious of an urgent necessity to love. She adored her father, but that was quite different; he was part of herself, he had always been there, she could not envisage the world without him – it was other with Collins, the housemaid. Collins was what was called ‘second of three’; she might one day hope for promotion. Meanwhile she was florid, full-lipped and full-bosomed, rather ample indeed for a young girl of twenty, but her eyes were unusually blue and arresting, very pretty inquisitive eyes. Stephen had seen Collins sweeping the stairs for two years, and had passed her by quite unnoticed; but one morning, when Stephen was just over seven, Collins looked up and suddenly smiled, then all in a moment Stephen knew that she loved her – a staggering revelation!

Collins said politely: ‘Good morning, Miss Stephen.’

She had always said: ‘Good morning, Miss Stephen,’ but on this occasion it sounded alluring – so alluring that Stephen wanted to touch her, and extending a rather uncertain hand she started to stroke her sleeve.

Collins picked up the hand and stared at it. ‘Oh, my!’ she exclaimed, ‘what very dirty nails!’ Whereupon their owner flushed painfully crimson and dashed upstairs to repair them.

‘Put them scissors down this minute, Miss Stephen!’ came the nurse’s peremptory voice, while her charge was still busily engaged on her toilet.

But Stephen said firmly: ‘I’m cleaning my nails ’cause Collins doesn’t like them – she says they’re dirty!’

‘What impudence!’ snapped the nurse, thoroughly annoyed. ‘I’ll thank her to mind her own business!’

Having finally secured the large cutting-out scissors, Mrs.

Bingham went forth in search of the offender; she was not one to tolerate any interference with the dignity of her status. She found Collins still on the top flight of stairs, and forthwith she started to upbraid her: ‘putting her back in her place,’ the nurse called it; and she did it so thoroughly that in less than five minutes the ‘second-of-three’ had been told of every fault that was likely to preclude promotion.

Stephen stood still in the nursery doorway. She could feel her heart thumping against her side, thumping with anger and pity for Collins who was answering never a word. There she knelt mute, with her brush suspended, with her mouth slightly open and her eyes rather scared; and when at long last she did manage to speak, her voice sounded humble and frightened. She was timid by nature, and the nurse’s sharp tongue was a byword throughout the household.

Collins was saying: ‘Interfere with your child? Oh, no, Mrs. Bingham, never! I hope I know my place better than that – Miss Stephen herself showed me them dirty nails; she said: “Collins, just look, aren’t my nails awful dirty!” And I said: “You must ask Nanny about that, Miss Stephen.” Is it likely that I’d interfere with your work? I’m not that sort, Mrs. Bingham.’

Oh, Collins, Collins, with those pretty blue eyes and that funny alluring smile! Stephen’s own eyes grew wide with amazement, then they clouded with sudden and disillusioned tears, for far worse than Collins’ poorness of spirit was the dreadful injustice of those lies – yet this very injustice seemed to draw her to Collins, since despising, she could still love her.

For the rest of that day Stephen brooded darkly over Collins’ unworthiness; and yet all through that day she still wanted Collins, and whenever she saw her she caught herself smiling, quite unable, in her turn, to muster the courage to frown her innate disapproval. And Collins smiled too, if the nurse was not looking, and she held up her plump red fingers, pointing to her nails and making a grimace at the nurse’s retreating figure. Watching her, Stephen felt unhappy and embarrassed, not so

much for herself as for Collins; and this feeling increased, so that thinking about her made Stephen go hot down her spine.

In the evening, when Collins was laying the tea, Stephen managed to get her alone. 'Collins,' she whispered, 'you told an untruth - I never showed you my dirty nails!'

'Course not!' murmured Collins, 'but I had to say something - you didn't mind, Miss Stephen, did you?' And as Stephen looked doubtfully up into her face, Collins suddenly stooped and kissed her.

Stephen stood speechless from a sheer sense of joy, all her doubts swept completely away. At that moment she knew nothing but beauty and Collins, and the two were as one, and the one was Stephen - and yet not Stephen either, but something more vast, that the mind of seven years found no name for.

The nurse came in grumbling: 'Now then, hurry up, Miss Stephen! Don't stand there as though you were daft! Go and wash your face and hands before tea - how many times must I tell you the same thing?'

'I don't know -' muttered Stephen. And indeed she did not; she knew nothing of such trifles at that moment.

2

FROM now on Stephen entered a completely new world, that turned on an axis of Collins. A world full of constant exciting adventures; of elation, of joy, of incredible sadness, but withal a fine place to be dashing about in like a moth who is courting a candle. Up and down went the days; they resembled a swing that soared high above the tree-tops, then dropped to the depths, but seldom if ever hung midway. And with them went Stephen, clinging to the swing, waking up in the mornings with a thrill of vague excitement - the sort of excitement that belonged by rights to birthdays, and Christmas, and a visit to the pantomime at Malvern. She would open her eyes and jump out of bed quickly, still too sleepy to remember why she felt so elated; but then would come memory - she would know that this day

she was actually going to see Collins. The thought would set her splashing in her sitz-bath, and tearing the buttons off her clothes in her haste, and cleaning her nails with such ruthlessness and vigour that she made them quite sore in the process.

She began to be very inattentive at her lessons, sucking her pencil, staring out of the window, or what was far worse, not listening at all, except for Collins' footsteps. The nurse slapped her hands, and stood her in the corner, and deprived her of jam, but all to no purpose; for Stephen would smile, hugging closer her secret - it was worth being punished for Collins.

She grew restless and could not be induced to sit still even when her nurse read aloud. At one time she had very much liked being read to, especially from books that were all about heroes; but now such stories so stirred her ambition, that she longed intensely to live them. She, Stephen, now longed to be William Tell, or Nelson, or the whole Charge of Balaclava; and this led to much foraging in the nursery rag-bag, much hunting up of garments once used for charades, much swagger and noise, much strutting and posing, and much staring into the mirror. There ensued a period of general confusion when the nursery looked as though smitten by an earthquake; when the chairs and the floor would be littered with oddments that Stephen had dug out but discarded. Once dressed, however, she would walk away grandly, waving the nurse peremptorily aside, going, as always, in search of Collins, who might have to be stalked to the basement.

Sometimes Collins would play up, especially to Nelson. 'My, but you do look fine!' she would exclaim. And then to the cook: 'Do come here, Mrs. Wilson! Doesn't Miss Stephen look exactly like a boy? I believe she must be a boy with them shoulders, and them funny gawky legs she's got on her!'

And Stephen would say gravely: 'Yes, of course I'm a boy. I'm young Nelson, and I'm saying: "What is fear?" you know, Collins - I must be a boy, 'cause I feel exactly like one, I feel like young Nelson in the picture upstairs.'

Collins would laugh and so would Mrs. Wilson, and after Stephen had gone they would get talking, and Collins might

say: 'She is a queer kid, always dressing herself up and play-acting - it's funny.'

But Mrs. Wilson might show disapproval: 'I don't hold with such nonsense, not for a young lady. Miss Stephen's quite different from other young ladies - she's got none of their pretty little ways - it's a pity!'

There were times, however, when Collins seemed sulky, when Stephen could dress up as Nelson in vain. 'Now, don't bother me, Miss, I've got my work to see to!' or: 'You go and show Nurse - yes, I know you're a boy, but I've got my work to get on with. Run away.'

And Stephen must slink upstairs thoroughly deflated, strangely unhappy and exceedingly humble, and must tear off the clothes she so dearly loved donning, to replace them by the garments she hated. How she hated soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and openwork stockings! Her legs felt so free and comfortable in breeches; she adored pockets too, and these were forbidden - at least really adequate pockets. She would gloom about the nursery because Collins had snubbed her, because she was conscious of feeling all wrong, because she so longed to be some one quite real, instead of just Stephen pretending to be Nelson. In a quick fit of anger she would go to the cupboard, and getting out her dolls would begin to torment them. She had always despised the idiotic creatures which, however, arrived with each Christmas and birthday.

'I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!' she would mutter, thumping their innocuous faces.

But one day, when Collins had been crosser than usual, she seemed to be filled with a sudden contrition. 'It's me housemaid's knee,' she confided to Stephen, 'It's not you, it's me housemaid's knee, dearie.'

'Is that dangerous?' demanded the child, looking frightened.

Then Collins, true to her class, said: 'It may be - it may mean an 'orrible operation, and I don't want no operation.'

'What's that?', inquired Stephen.

'Why, they'd cut me,' moaned Collins; 'they'd 'ave to cut me to let out the water.'

'Oh, Collins! What water?'

'The water in me kneecap - you can see if you press it, Miss Stephen.'

They were standing alone in the spacious night-nursery, where Collins was limply making the bed. It was one of those rare and delicious occasions when Stephen could converse with her goddess undisturbed, for the nurse had gone out to post a letter. Collins rolled down a coarse woollen stocking and displayed the afflicted member; it was blotchy and swollen and far from attractive, but Stephen's eyes filled with quick, anxious tears as she touched the knee with her finger.

'There now!' exclaimed Collins, 'See that dent? That's the water!' And she added: 'It's so painful it fair makes me sick. It all comes from polishing them floors, Miss Stephen; I didn't ought to polish them floors.'

Stephen said gravely: 'I do wish I'd got it - I wish I'd got your housemaid's knee, Collins, 'cause that way I could bear it instead of you. I'd like to be awfully hurt for you, Collins, the way that Jesus was hurt for sinners. Suppose I pray hard, don't you think I might catch it? Or supposing I rub my knee against yours?'

'Lord bless you!' laughed Collins, 'it's not like the measles; no, Miss Stephen, it's caught from them floors.'

That evening Stephen became rather pensive, and she turned to the Child's Book of Scripture Stories and she studied the picture of the Lord on His Cross, and she felt that she understood Him. She had often been rather puzzled about Him, since she herself was fearful of pain - when she barked her shins on the gravel in the garden, it was not always easy to keep back her tears - and yet Jesus had chosen to bear pain for sinners, when He might have called up all those angels! Oh, yes, she had wondered a great deal about Him, but now she no longer wondered.

At bedtime, when her mother came to hear her say her prayers

— as custom demanded — Stephen's prayers lacked conviction. But when Anna had kissed her and had turned out the light, then it was that Stephen prayed in good earnest — with such fervour, indeed, that she dripped perspiration in a veritable orgy of prayer.

'Please, Jesus, give me a housemaid's knee instead of Collins — do, *do*, Lord Jesus. Please, Jesus, I would like to bear all Collins' pain the way You did, and I don't want any angels! I would like to wash Collins in my blood, Lord Jesus — I would like very much to be a Saviour to Collins — I love her, and I want to be hurt like You were; please, dear Lord Jesus, do let me. Please give me a knee that's all full of water, so that I can have Collins' operation. I want to have it instead of her, 'cause she's frightened — I'm not a bit frightened!'

This petition she repeated until she fell asleep, to dream that in some queer way she was Jesus, and that Collins was kneeling and kissing her hand, because she, Stephen, had managed to cure her by cutting off her knee with a bone paper-knife and grafting it on to her own. The dream was a mixture of rapture and discomfort, and it stayed quite a long time with Stephen.

The next morning she awoke with the feeling of elation that comes only in moments of perfect faith. But a close examination of her knees in the bath, revealed them to be flawless except for old scars and a crisp, brown scab from a recent tumble — this, of course, was very disappointing. She picked off the scab, and that hurt her a little, but not, she felt sure, like a real housemaid's knee. However, she decided to continue in prayer, and not to be too easily downhearted.

For more than three weeks she sweated and prayed, and pestered poor Collins with endless daily questions: 'Is your knee better yet?' 'Don't you think my knee's swollen?' 'Have you faith?' 'Cause I have —' 'Does it hurt you less, Collins?'

But Collins would always reply in the same way: 'It's no better, thank you, Miss Stephen.'

At the end of the fourth week Stephen suddenly stopped praying, and she said to Our Lord: 'You don't love Collins,

Jesus, but I do, and I'm going to get housemaid's knee. You see if I don't!' Then she felt rather frightened, and added more humbly: 'I mean, I do want to — You don't mind, do You, Lord Jesus?'

The nursery floor was covered with carpet, which was obviously rather unfortunate for Stephen; had it only been parquet like the drawing-room and study, she felt it would better have served her purpose. All the same it was hard if she knelt long enough — it was so hard, indeed, that she had to grit her teeth if she stayed on her knees for more than twenty minutes. This was much worse than barking one's shins in the garden; it was much worse even than picking off a scab! Nelson helped her a little. She would think: 'Now I'm Nelson. I'm in the middle of the Battle of Trafalgar — I've got shots in my knees!' But then she would remember that Nelson had been spared such torment. However, it was really rather fine to be suffering — it certainly seemed to bring Collins much nearer; it seemed to make Stephen feel that she owned her by right of this diligent pain.

There were endless spots on the old nursery carpet, and these spots Stephen could pretend to be cleaning; always careful to copy Collins' movements, rubbing backwards and forwards while groaning a little. When she got up at last, she must hold her left leg and limp, still groaning a little. Enormous new holes appeared in her stockings, through which she could examine her aching knees, and this led to rebuke: 'Stop your nonsense, Miss Stephen! It's scandalous the way you're tearing your stockings!' But Stephen smiled grimly and went on with the nonsense, spurred by love to an open defiance. On the eighth day, however, it dawned upon Stephen that Collins should be shown the proof of her devotion. Her knees were particularly scarified that morning, so she limped off in search of the unsuspecting housemaid.

Collins stared: 'Good gracious, whatever's the matter? Whatever have you been doing, Miss Stephen?'

Then Stephen said, not without pardonable pride: 'I've

been getting a housemaid's knee, like you, Collins!' And as Collins looked stupid and rather bewildered – 'You see, I wanted to share your suffering. I've prayed quite a lot, but Jesus won't listen, so I've got to get housemaid's knee my own way – I can't wait any longer for Jesus!'

'Oh, hush!' murmured Collins, thoroughly shocked. 'You mustn't say such things: it's wicked, Miss Stephen.' But she smiled a little in spite of herself, then she suddenly hugged the child warmly.

All the same, Collins plucked up her courage that evening and spoke to the nurse about Stephen. 'Her knees was all red and swollen, Mrs. Bingham. Did ever you know such a queer fish as she is? Praying about my knee too. She's a caution! And now if she isn't trying to get one! Well, if that's not real loving then I don't know nothing.' And Collins began to laugh weakly.

After this Mrs. Bingham rose in her might, and the self-imposed torture was forcibly stopped. Collins, on her part, was ordered to lie, if Stephen continued to question. So Collins lied nobly: 'It's better, Miss Stephen, it must be your praying – you see Jesus heard you. I expect He was sorry to see your poor knees – I know as I was when I saw them!'

'Are you telling me the truth?' Stephen asked her, still doubting, still mindful of that first day of Love's young dream.

'Why, of course I'm telling you the truth, Miss Stephen.' And with this Stephen had to be content.

3

COLLINS became more affectionate after the incident of the housemaid's knee; she could not but feel a new interest in the child whom she and the cook had now labelled as 'queer,' and Stephen basked in much surreptitious petting, and her love for Collins grew daily.

It was spring, the season of gentle emotions, and Stephen, for the first time, became aware of spring. In a dumb, childish

way she was conscious of its fragrance, and the house irked her sorely, and she longed for the meadows, and the hills that were white with thorn-trees. Her active young body was for ever on the fidget, but her mind was bathed in a kind of soft haze, and this she could never quite put into words, though she tried to tell Collins about it. It was all part of Collins, yet somehow quite different – it had nothing to do with Collins' wide smile, nor her hands which were red, nor even her eyes which were blue, and very arresting. Yet all that was Collins, Stephen's Collins, was also a part of these long, warm days, a part of the twilights that came in and lingered for hours after Stephen had been put to bed; a part too, could Stephen have only known it, of her own quickening childish perceptions. This spring, for the first time, she thrilled to the cuckoo, standing quite still to listen, with her head on one side; and the lure of that far-away call was destined to remain with her all her life.

There were times when she wanted to get away from Collins, yet at others she longed intensely to be near her, longed to force the response that her loving craved for, but quite wisely, was very seldom granted.

She would say: 'I do love you awfully, Collins. I love you so much that it makes me want to cry.'

And Collins would answer: 'Don't be silly, Miss Stephen,' which was not satisfactory – not at all satisfactory.

Then Stephen might suddenly push her, in anger: 'You're a beast! How I hate you, Collins!'

And now Stephen had taken to keeping awake every night, in order to build up pictures: pictures of herself companioned by Collins in all sorts of happy situations. Perhaps they would be walking in the garden, hand in hand, or pausing on a hill-side to listen to the cuckoo; or perhaps they would be skimming over miles of blue ocean in a queer little ship with a leg-of-mutton sail, like the one in the fairy story. Sometimes Stephen pictured them living alone in a low thatched cottage by the side of a mill stream – she had seen such a cottage not very far from Upton – and the water flowed quickly and made talking noises;

there were sometimes dead leaves on the water. This last was a very intimate picture, full of detail, even to the red china dogs that stood one at each end of the high mantelpiece, and the grandfather clock that ticked loudly. Collins would sit by the fire with her shoes off. 'Me feet's that swollen and painful,' she would say. Then Stephen would go and cut rich bread and butter – the drawing-room kind, little bread and much butter – and would put on the kettle and brew tea for Collins, who liked it very strong and practically boiling, so that she could sip it from her saucer. In this picture it was Collins who talked about loving, and Stephen who gently but firmly rebuked her: 'There, there, Collins, don't be silly, you are a queer fish!' And yet all the while she would be longing to tell her how wonderful it was, like honeysuckle blossom – something very sweet like that – or like fields smelling strongly of new-mown hay, in the sunshine. And perhaps she *would* tell her, just at the very end – just before this last picture faded.

4

IN THESE days Stephen clung more closely to her father, and this in a way was because of Collins. She could not have told you why it should be so, she only felt that it was. Sir Philip and his daughter would walk on the hill-sides, in and out of the black-thorn and young green bracken; they would walk hand in hand with a deep sense of friendship, with a deep sense of mutual understanding.

Sir Philip knew all about wild flowers and berries, and the ways of young foxes and rabbits and such people. There were many rare birds, too, on the hills near Malvern, and these he would point out to Stephen. He taught her the simpler laws of nature, which, though simple, had always filled him with wonder: the law of the sap as it flowed through the branches, the law of the wind that came stirring the sap, the law of bird life and the building of nests, the law of the cuckoo's varying call, which in June changed to 'Cuckoo-kook!' He taught out

of love for both subject and pupil, and while he thus taught he watched Stephen.

Sometimes, when the child's heart would feel full past bearing, she must tell him her problems in small, stumbling phrases. Tell him how much she longed to be different, longed to be some one like Nelson.

She would say: 'Do you think that I *could* be a man, supposing I thought very hard – or prayed, Father?'

Then Sir Philip would smile and tease her a little, and would tell her that one day she would want pretty frocks, and his teasing was always excessively gentle, so that it hurt not at all.

But at times he would study his daughter gravely, with his strong, cleft chin tightly cupped in his hand. He would watch her at play with the dogs in the garden, watch the curious suggestion of strength in her movements, the long line of her limbs – she was tall for her age – and the poise of her head on her over-broad shoulders. Then perhaps he would frown and become lost in thought, or perhaps he might suddenly call her:

'Stephen, come here!'

She would go to him gladly, waiting expectant for what he should say; but as likely as not he would just hold her to him for a moment, and then let go of her abruptly. Getting up he would turn to the house and his study, to spend all the rest of that day with his books.

A queer mixture, Sir Philip, part sportsman, part student. He had one of the finest libraries in England, and just lately he had taken to reading half the night, which had not hitherto been his custom. Alone in that grave-looking, quiet study, he would unlock a drawer in his ample desk, and would get out a slim volume recently acquired, and would read and re-read it in the silence. The author was a German, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and reading, Sir Philip's eyes would grow puzzled; then groping for a pencil he would make little notes all along the immaculate margins. Sometimes he would jump up and pace the room quickly, pausing now and again to stare at a picture – the

portrait of Stephen painted with her mother, by Millais, the previous year. He would notice the gracious beauty of Anna, so perfect a thing, so completely reassuring; and then that indefinable quality in Stephen that made her look wrong in the clothes she was wearing, as though she and they had no right to each other, but above all no right to Anna. After a while he would steal up to bed, being painfully careful to tread very softly, fearful of waking his wife who might question: 'Philip darling, it's so late - what have you been reading?' He would not want to answer, he would not want to tell her; that was why he must tread very softly.

The next morning, he would be very tender to Anna - but even more tender to Stephen.

5

As THE spring waxed more lusty and strode into summer, Stephen grew conscious that Collins was changing. The change was almost intangible at first, but the instinct of children is not mocked. Came a day when Collins turned on her quite sharply, nor did she explain it by a reference to her knee.

'Don't be always under my feet now, Miss Stephen. Don't follow me about and don't be always staring. I 'ates being watched - you run up to the nursery, the basement's no place for young ladies.' After which such rebuffs were of frequent occurrence, if Stephen went anywhere near her.

Miserable enigma! Stephen's mind groped about it like a little blind mole that is always in darkness. She was utterly confounded, while her love grew the stronger for so much hard pruning, and she tried to woo Collins by offerings of bull's-eyes and chocolate drops, which the maid took because she liked them. Nor was Collins so blameworthy as she appeared, for she, in her turn, was the puppet of emotion. The new footman was tall and exceedingly handsome. He had looked upon Collins with eyes of approval. He had said: 'Stop that damned kid

hanging around you; if you don't she'll go blabbing about us.'

And now Stephen knew very deep desolation because there was no one in whom to confide. She shrank from telling even her father - he might not understand, he might smile, he might tease her - if he teased her, however gently, she knew that she could not keep back her tears. Even Nelson had suddenly become quite remote. What was the good of trying to be Nelson? What was the good of dressing up any more - what was the good of pretending? She turned from her food, growing pasty and languid; until, thoroughly alarmed, Anna sent for the doctor. He arrived, and prescribed a dose of Gregory powder, finding nothing much wrong with the patient. Stephen tossed off the foul brew without a murmur - it was almost as though she liked it!

The end came abruptly as is often the way, and it came when the child was alone in the garden, still miserably puzzling over Collins, who had been avoiding her for days. Stephen had wandered to an old potting-shed, and there, whom should she see but Collins and the footman; they appeared to be talking very earnestly together, so earnestly that they failed to hear her. Then a really catastrophic thing happened, for Henry caught Collins roughly by the wrists, and he dragged her towards him, still handling her roughly, and he kissed her full on the lips. Stephen's head felt suddenly hot and dizzy, she was filled with a blind, uncomprehending rage; she wanted to cry out, but her voice failed completely, so that all she could do was to splutter. But the very next moment she had seized a broken flower-pot and had hurled it hard and straight at the footman. It struck him in the face, cutting open his cheek, down which the blood trickled slowly. He stood as though stunned, gently mopping the cut, while Collins stared dumbly at Stephen. Neither of them spoke, they were feeling too guilty - they were also too much astonished.

Then Stephen turned and fled from them wildly. Away and away, anyhow, anywhere, so long as she need not see them!