The Great Lover

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Published by Sceptre

Extract

One

July 1909

'We'll live Romance, not talk it. We'll show the grey unbelieving age, we'll teach the whole damn World, that there's a better Heaven than the pale serene Anglican windless harmonium-buzzing Eternity of the Christians, a Heaven in Time, now and for ever, ending for each, staying for all, a Heaven of Laughter and Bodies and Flowers and Love and People and Sun and Wind, in the only place we know or care for, ON EARTH.'

Rupert Brooke, letter to Jacques Raverat, 1909

My name is Nellie Golightly. I'm a good, sensible girl, seventeen years old this August; well brought up and well schooled and blessed with a few more Brains than most. Being the eldest of six and a Mother to them all since my own Mother died when I was eleven years old, I'm accustomed to hard work, no secrets, many loud voices and some small authority. If I have a fault it is that I'm apt to wanting things done my way. Well, truth be told I have many faults: I am feverishly curious, some would say nosy; I have no compunction about reading other people's letters; I'm proud and full of vanity; I've a quick temper although I forgive just as easily; I am not fond of horses and I am wont to be impatient with bees; and, worst of all, I am a girl who is incapable of being romanced because I don't have a sentimental bone in my body. Moons and Junes mean nothing to me, unless it is to signify good conditions for bees.

Now that I have made a list of my defects let me introduce my talents. These chiefly involve bees. I can distinguish a particular swarm from some distance, simply by the sound being made: is it soft and low like a snarling sea, or is it a fierce high note, like an arrow piercing from the sky? I have been stung only once in all my years at Prickwillow helping Father, or these last few weeks at Grantchester helping Mr Neeve with his apiary. I am as tender with the bees as I'm snippy with the children, but I've learned the same rule for both: all creatures are more amiable when they've recently been fed. Let bees gorge themselves on honey and they will be putty – no, beeswax – in my hands.

My strongest trait is one that I've found uncommon in others,

and I can't now be sure whether to name it gift or defect: I am able to face, very easily, the ugly facts of things. I can look squarely at them and not look away. I've had this ability since childhood. I've learned to keep it to myself and I've learned that others are not as interested in poking beneath the surface. Mother used to tell me just to 'take things at face value' but I never learned to, so here I am, trapped in my own private musings and conclusions, my dark, bare version of the world, which none seems to share.

Those are my talents, as I can presently think of them.

The worst events of my life took place a few short months ago when Father passed away one day, out in the meadow, dressed in his white veil and gloves, tending his bees. I was carrying the smoker, Betty following at a distance. I saw his white shape slip over like a bottle of milk and I knew before we reached him exactly how much of him had been spilled. All of him. The bees seemed to know it too and were swelling around his head in the shape of a giant fur hood until Betty ran at them, puffing with the bellows to direct them, the soft brown swarm, into the skep. Then we ran for Sam, the eel man from two doors up, to help us lay Father out on the kitchen table.

His funeral was like all funerals in this part of the world. The fen soil shines like black oil when the harvest blade turns it up and is far too soft and rich for any to be buried in it. So Father was carried the nine miles to the surrounding higher land by a large corn wagon, with a team of two horses harnessed to it. My brothers and sisters – Betty, Lily, Stanley, Edmund and Olive – sat around the sides; the younger ones wearing looks of pleased importance, Betty with a face as mine must have been: an expression of flattened shock. We two surely looked – if anyone had cared to examine us – as the land itself does: as if something of huge, terrible weight had just rolled over us. Sam drove the horses and old Mrs Gotobed sat at the back, pouring cups of poppyhead tea from a leather flask to keep everyone quiet.

When the soft, violet-black clods of fen earth fell on Father's coffin, I sipped more tea until my head clouded over and Mrs Gotobed began her nonsense singing of 'The shock head willows, two and two, by rivers gallopading . . .' and on the long, blank route to the sky there was only one white gate, standing out against the black, which, in my poppy-dulled state, I confused with the gate of Heaven. I tried to turn my thoughts to practical matters, such as my plan to present myself to Mr Neeve, the bee-keeper at the Old Vicarage, and whether I might try for a position at the Orchard Tea Gardens (Quiet and Select Up-river Resort on the Banks of the Granta, close to the Mill and offering Breakfasts, Light Luncheons and Teas for large or small Boating or Cycling parties), leaving my younger sister Betty in charge of my brothers and sisters back home. But, as I have indicated, ugly facts are what I dwell on, and ugly facts are what came to me then.

Father had never wanted daughters: he made that plain. Boys can be put to work in the fields, or handle a gun in the punt, put food on the table, he said. That was not a reason but a justification for his feelings, because so could I. I'm better than Stanley and Edmund at all those things. Fact was, girls were more than just an economic burden to him. They were foolish, unimportant, yes, but more than that they were foreign and bewildering, even disturbing. He wished we did not exist to trouble him so. When Mother died he slipped without a word to expecting me to take her place: bring his meals to him, wash the babies, clean the house, help in the corn harvest in season, tend the bees year round, be a new young wife in all ways but one. I never stood next to Father by the skeps, with that soft low drone of bees all around us, without knowing keenly what his estimation of me was. I insisted on going to school, I was fierce and firm, my mother's daughter, and to Sunday School too, at the Primitive Methodist Church here in Prickwillow. I was soon teaching there on Sundays – I reached a degree of learning that Father never did, nor my brothers either. But nothing

would shift him, it was just what was. Girls were a waste of breath and nothing on this earth was going to change his mind.

As the last clod fell I thought, Too late, then, to make him proud of me, and I shed brief tears, and that was that.

Or almost. There was one task I still had to do, and it had to be done before the day was over. That was the telling of the bees. So when the red circle of the sun started to slip through the clouds like a coin through a magician's fingers, I took Betty out with me to the skeps, first winding a ribbon of black crêpe around them, and we stood there with our heads bowed, while I murmured the story of Father to the bees. I told them that Alfred had 'passed away' from a long-standing illness common in these parts, the ague, but that they were not to worry, he loved them dearly, and would have stayed if he could. I told them he left them in good hands (mine, and Betty's and Lily's, and the entire Golightly family's); that they need not fear for their future, nor take off and leave us, because they would always be cared for, loved, in fact, and because life goes on, whether we wish it to or not. It is an end we all must come to, I said, though we like to pretend otherwise. When it happens, it shocks us for a day or two, and then the curtain swings back into place and we carry on as before. But the place *behind* the curtain is where we children were right now and we were all frightened by it.

The bees murmured back in low tones to tell me they were listening.

Betty's sniffling stepped up when I said the bit about the bees being loved, and me promising to care for them and that Father would have stayed if he could. I realised that I was saying to the bees all the things I knew Father didn't feel towards us and never said and never would, and that I was making a picture for the bees as if they were my own dear children, of how I would like things to be. If only I had a kind mother or grandmother who might say those same reassuring words to me! The only care and good sense I've ever known is my own.

One fat drone escaped as I was speaking, then a scout bee took off too, and I knew they had heard enough. I'd done my duty and the bees were sure now to stay. The sky blushed crimson as Betty tucked the end of the last ribbon of black crêpe underneath the skep to stop it flapping and we turned to go back into the house. I remembered then a song that Father used to sing, or was it a poem? 'Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence! Mistress Mary is dead and gone!' and I sang it slowly, over and over, in a voice I hoped was something like Father's.

There was something else, too. Pulling off Father's gloves, when Betty and I brought him in from the meadow lying stiff across the wheelbarrow. Gloves that were stained dark and golden with propolis, so that they looked as if they had been burned. The hands beneath were milky white. Soft black hairs on the knuckles. Long, tapering fingers and skin like the downy cheeks of a baby. His daily duties with the honey, the beeswax, the brown clouds of bees and, chiefly, the bathing of his fingers in that sticky, dark brown propolis had smoothed his skin to that of a young man. Like many a daughter, I had forgotten that Father was ever young, and this surprised me. My thoughts went something like: Why, are these the hands of Father, the man I know?

I dreamed of Father that night and, as in life, it was only a glimpse. He was sitting in the chair outside the front door, mending a skep. And as I looked at him, he made as if to get up. That's all. He moved, as if to get up. I could not tell what he intended, whether to move towards me or perhaps . . . leave. Goodbye, I mouthed, in the dream. He looked at me.

Then I was suddenly awake. I had only one desire: the honey stocks. Without lighting a candle I tiptoed to the shelves where they were kept, reached for a comb, a tanner's worth, and bit into it, hard. The sweetness, a lavender and heather mix, spilled over my tongue, slid down my chin and dripped on to my nightdress, clinging to my hair. All around me was the smell of

him. Of clover, of grass, of sweat and the filthy brown water, of blood and eels and the smoker; of years and years and years of work, and the smell of his skin, his strong arms lifting me up, over the gate; and his lovely rich singing voice and all that he was to me, despite how little I was to him, was in that blackness, that sweetness. And Father's warm face, sunburned and tired, so tired in his eyes, swam in front of me at last, and then I was crying and digging my nails into the soft chewy cone and spitting out the cappings, and squeezing hard and biting, and sobbing like a baby, and biting.

He will never be proud of me. He will never know the things I'll do, he'll never know my children, never be able to tell me the things I long to know. Father, where are you? I wanted to cry out. Don't go yet! Stay with me, stay with your beloved bees, *please* – don't leave your little Nellie all alone. My mouth was choked with honey. I sounded like an animal. I felt ashamed at last and, sick with the sweetness, I crept back to bed.

Thankfully no child woke to see their sister behaving like a criminal, raiding the stocks. My dreams were full of buzzing and that image again, of Father getting up from his chair, and then – nothing. Nothing more.

My last glimpse of the village as I set off on my journey to Grantchester was of my sister Betty, in her blue bonnet, waving goodbye under the gloaming grey light. She was standing at the Toll House on the river, Blackwing Mill in the background; the huge beam engine beside her, steaming away with a great trundling racket, pumping the water into the dikes. Betty was calling to me to take care, to write often, and promising to do her best with the children. I called back, over my shoulder: 'But, Betty – do your best with the bees!'

And that is how I come to be in Grantchester, presenting myself to the landlady of the Orchard, Mrs Stevenson, recommending myself to her with my talents and keeping mum about my defects.

I have in my bag a book by Mrs Flora Klickmann (*The Flower-Patch Among the Hills*, *A Book of Cheerfulness: You just smile your way right through*) and drawings of flowers and eels done by Stanley and Olive. The young ones wailed and hollered about why I had to work so far away, further than Ely Cathedral and Cambridge too; but it was on account of Mr Neeve, the bee-keeper, I told them, who had known our Father and was a kind and refined man. Mr Neeve says I might help him when my duties for Mrs Stevenson are done; and for this he will pay me two extra shillings and two jars of honey, so that my poor family (he says), who have been raised on milk and honey, would always live that way, even if our own beehives were hit by the wax moth and failed.

My position as a maid-of-all-work means I live in at the Orchard House and get all my food and lodging free. I can send home almost ten shillings a week, which is not a bad amount for five youngsters, who also have honey to sell. I work from six in the morning until ten p.m. every day except Sundays, when the tea gardens are closed and I have only light duties in the mornings. On Sunday afternoons I will travel the fifteen miles to visit my sisters and brothers in Prickwillow.

Grantchester village is a grand sort of place, after Prickwillow. Its nearness to the university is what makes it grand. It has a huge mill and a fancy church with a gold weathercock, and a famous pool where a famous poet – Lord Byron – once swam. The Manor House is really a farm: Mrs Stevenson tells me it supplies the Fellows at King's College with pigeons from the Great Duffhouse nearby, and vegetables and herbs from the doctor's garden. She started her famous tea gardens over ten years ago, when some students came up the river Cam in punts demanding tea and scones, with honey from the Old Vicarage beehives, asking to take them sitting under the trees in the orchard. She is kept busy now from morning until dusk. In addition to the teas she also lets rooms to a number of lodgers; they, too,

need meals and laundry and all the other services that young gentlemen require.

She sees that I am clean and disciplined, and that I read and write well, and she murmurs that she values the good opinion of Mr Neeve. She has one requirement and that is that 'her girls' do not make nuisances of themselves by paying too much attention to the 'goings on' of the young Varsity men and women who frequent her premises, some of whom might have . . . modern ideas.

'I hope you are not a gossip, Nell, nor easily shocked.'

I assure her that I am neither.

I'm shown upstairs to my room. The house smells throughout of apples, a healthy, green, grassy sort of smell: one of the furthest rooms is used to store them. There is also the smell of yeast rising and smoking logs and warm wood and floor-polish. I hear the chatter of girls working in the scullery and the rap of a dog somewhere outside and a constant rattle of china and cutlery. I notice how clean the flagstones are in the kitchen, and the stairs too, hardly a speck on them, which shows me this is a tight ship and Mrs Stevenson, for all her kindness, a strict mistress.

There is no fireplace in the tiny bedroom she shows me. Two small cots and no window greet me; more of a cupboard than a room. The one shelf is empty, except for a carton of Keating's insect powder. I'm told I'm to share with another maid called Kittie. I feel a little pang when Mrs Stevenson shows me this room, which tells me that I was expecting more, and I chide myself for foolishness in thinking that a servant will be a step up in the world from a bee-keeper's daughter.

'I see too much and I hear too well for an old lady,' says Mrs Stevenson, on her way back down the stairs.

Now I'm going to describe something that happens to me often and which I have come to accept as part of me. And yet

whenever it happens I am brought up short and reminded all over again of something very strange: how impossible it is to be one person in the world, so different from all others, having these particular experiences at this particular time. And how difficult to explain about one particular experience to another living being, no matter how you might want to. And yet it happened to me right then, on that first visit to the Orchard House.

It's like this: I'm behind Mrs Stevenson on the stair. My hand is on the wooden rail, which is smooth and plain, and like a thousand other hand-rails I have touched, rasping slightly beneath my dry palm. I can see Mrs Stevenson's black skirt, swishing the floor in front of me, and the tie on her apron at the waist, and a wisp of grey hair escaping the pins near her neck, and I believe she is talking, but I cannot hear her. I cannot feel my own tongue in my mouth. The world simply stops. I do not belong. I am separate, outside, looking on.

With the next beat of my heart, the world goes on again. The smell of apples and bread and dusted wooden floors and the chafe of the bib of my new apron against my throat comes back to me; the chatter of cups on saucers floating up from downstairs.

I was much shaken the first time it happened to me, as a girl of six: this feeling that I was separate, outside things, had somehow slipped through some veil of time and slid through to another place, but now I have come to accept it. I have no explanation; it's just how things are with me. When it happens, the world seems more vivid, and things happen more slowly and with all their full colours, scents and sensations. When it stops, life picks up a pace.

Although I fear I *have* left something out in my account of my character. I must add another fault to the list, which I have just remembered and it is this: when I take up a particular idea, I am fixed in it, stuck as fast as the seal that bees make for honey. This seal is the propolis that I mentioned earlier, on Father's hands. It starts off sticky but soon hardens to a form not easily removed. We have to scrape it from the frames with a knife to release the liquid honey underneath but there is always a seal that remains there, that cannot be undone. It has a burned, toffee-brown look. My nature, I fear, is as sealed and capped as propolis. Father would chide me for it, although it was a quality we shared.

I have wandered now in thinking of this, and wonder if a person's character and propolis is a good comparison? But honey has been my life since I was a tiny girl, and I surely can't be blamed if thoughts about honey, or bees, occur to me more often than to other people.

Now, within a week of my moving into the Orchard House there is a small commotion. A young gentleman-poet, having enjoyed a May Ball here a few weeks back, has requested rooms. His name is Rupert Brooke. I have heard of him but that means nothing. Kittie tells me that he will be a very great man and that there is already a space on the school wall in Rugby that he went to (and where his mother still lives) that awaits a plaque for him: he told her this himself. This strikes me as mischievous. It's hard for me to decide if he is teasing, acting the arrogant goat, or truly believes it. Most likely of all, I suppose, is a little of both. In either case, he is certainly guilty of the Sin of Pride and not just about his poetry, either. He is one of those vain men, Kittie says, who has been told so often he is handsome that he is for ever pulling a fresh, boyish stunt, and running elegant fingers through fashionably long, springy hair.

I have not met him yet. Mrs Stevenson has charged me with getting two rooms ready for him. One is to be his bedroom, at

the far end, top of the house, and the other, downstairs, is to be his sitting room, for entertaining friends. There's a dirt track running alongside the house that carries the young men and women on bicycles from the university to his rooms, where they can throw stones and call up at the window for him.

After Mrs Stevenson has told me about this Rupert Brooke, and I've listened to Kittie and Mrs Stevenson's daughter Lottie chattering excitedly of him in the kitchen (remembering the May Ball occasion and a separate one when he came with another famous writer to the house: this writer gentleman – an old man, an American, much taken with Mr Brooke – was apparently accidentally clocked on the head with the pole by Mr Brooke when he took him for a punt down the river; and Kittie had to bathe his head and give him brandy), a funny thing happens. I'm quite convinced that, five minutes later, I pass this very same person.

I'm on an errand in Grantchester to fetch milk and a young man passes me on a bicycle, pedalling fast in the direction of the Orchard and Byron's Pool. I feel sure, suddenly, that it *is* him for one reason only and that is one I'll concede: he does have the sort of face that you notice. A face that girls like Kittie would call handsome, or even beautiful. I spent the moments after he'd cycled past me wondering what it was in him that combined to give me this impression. His forehead was high and his hair of a sandy gold colour. He wore it longer than usual, and he wore no tie, either, so that his throat was bare to the sun. I'd only had a second to consider him as he cycled past the church of St Andrew and St Mary, with his long fringe lifting up in the wind like a cock's comb. Cock of the Walk, Father would have said. It would not have been a compliment.

Mrs Stevenson is all 'Snap-snap, chop-chop! On you get by seven o'clock this morning,' and so I set to. The room has been empty for a while. The window is so firm shut that I cannot open it.

Dried leaves, half trapped beneath the frames, flicker to dust when I touch them.

I work hard and don't dawdle. I am sorry that I have no time to poke my head outside to sniff the lilac and the dog-roses in the garden, or breathe in the smell of the fruit trees in the orchard next door. Apple, pear, plum, medlar and quince, and there might be still more varieties. I'm thinking of the bees again and the wild array of honeys that Mr Neeve must make here, with such a source of food for them. Then I think of Father and my heart pinches a little. I picture him with his strong but bony wrist, turning the handle on the honey-spinner, the frames inside rattling, and the table shaking too, with his efforts, making a sound like a ball scattering inside a barrel. In this memory I hear rain too, spattering the roof of our kitchen, and see the fire glowing and the sweat popping on Father's brow, until the first honey appears at the mouth of the tap: fat, like a bulb of amber.

I thought I'd shed my tears for Father two weeks ago. I'm surprised at myself.

These thoughts are not helping get the work done and, with an effort, I turn my attention to an old bitten-looking beam above the bed. Filthy cobwebs hang from it. When I attack them with the duster, shavings fall too, like flakes of chocolate. Of course, no young man from Cambridge will appreciate the labour it is to turn out a bedroom, so I am not expecting any thanks for the fact that I soaked his china candlesticks in soda to remove the grease, nor that I spent an hour and a half with bottle-brush and patience to clean his water bottle. I dither over whether to put on the pillow shams Mrs Stevenson left out for me. Finally I decide that a young poet with such a good head of silky blond hair has no need of frills and might prefer a plainer spot to lay it. Mrs Stevenson favours such things, but Mother used to say that an ornate pillow sham is only 'display', with no place here in England. Such display has come over from the United States.

Mother was always scornful of 'display'. She was full of sweeping condemnations. Her favourite phrase was 'nature needs no ornament' – I remember being told that when I wanted pretty pins to wear in my hair. I always knew the real reason was that we had no money for such things, so I grew to hate the saying, but since Father's passing it has come back to me as a decent one, and serviceable.

'I see too much and I hear too well for an old lady,' Mrs Stevenson said, so I work hard, and with some nervousness for how she will judge me. I sense that the young man is a special favourite of hers and that she is at pains to please him. So I clean the ironwork of the bed with paraffin, rubbing it into every ledge and crevice with the rag and thinking happily of how it will hardly creak now when he rolls over in the night. I wash the tumbler and the soap-dish, carefully using a different cloth from the one for the slop-pail and the chamber, adding a little splash of cold water to the pot before I put it back in the toilet cupboard. I do all this with loving attention, with such a particular satisfaction that I am sitting back on my heels admiring my own thoroughness when Mrs Stevenson bursts into the room with another of her hand-clappings and chop-chops to say that the afore-mentioned will be here in a minute and haven't I got rid of that mouse yet?

That makes my heart skitter in my chest, though whether it is the mouse (which I chase with the broom) or the afore-mentioned it's hard to say. Mrs Stevenson clops downstairs to attend to her scones, which, from the smell wafting upstairs, are in danger of burning. I run behind her.

So it is me who admits him. He appears at the door, tall and sunny, loose-limbed and lanky, with his high forehead and mane of hair that I remember, from my glimpse earlier in the day. I present myself politely, my hands stinging with the efforts of the scrubbing. I hold them tidily behind my back and smile as he grins a glorious grin at me and the sun blazes through the

door, warming my face to scarlet. He wears grey flannels and a soft collar with no tie; and his face is rather innocent and babyish and, at the same time, inspired with a fierce life. Perhaps that is the secret of the 'impression' he creates of extraordinary loveliness, the sort of loveliness you'd more often see in a girl than a young man.

He holds a half-bitten apple. 'I say – anyone here mind if I take off my shoes?' he asks. It isn't really a question. He holds the apple between his teeth, bending down to step out of his shoes and socks. Mr Rupert Brooke steps over the threshold and into the kitchen.

His naked toes. I try, of course, not to look. But later, when he asks for tea outside on the lawn at the front of the house, and I bring it to him on a wobbling tray, the milk shaking in the little jug, there they are again. Each toe well formed and strong-looking, like the long white keys on a piano. 'Handsome' and 'shapely' are the two words that present themselves to me, thinking of his feet. And 'wrong' is the next. Or should I perhaps say 'revealing'?

I have mentioned my habit of looking at things too hard, and considering them too assiduously. Like Father's hands and the little shock it caused me to understand that Father was not always old and unlovely. Mr Brooke's toes told me the opposite tale. That he was not only or always a Varsity man, a poet, a person of dust and chalk and King's College, Cambridge, but a human creature who had once been bathed by a mother. How even his toes were, I think, like the feet of – oh, I don't know – an animal, a monkey perhaps, something that can use toes the way an ordinary man cannot. And his ankles, too! The naked ankle bone peeping from his trouser leg so prominent, and angular, so beautifully formed. His ankle could never have been mistaken for the ankle of a young woman. It is undeniably male. Such a curious thought made me shiver.

I have spent long enough in observing toes and weighing my conclusions about them and must surely, I chide myself, have some pressing duties.

Kittie comes to twitter over him. Seeing that I have forgotten the honey for his tea she brings him a pot, and a spoon, and drops a curtsy and pauses until he looks up from the copy of *English Review* lying in front of him on the grass and says: 'Forster's tale: "Other Kingdom". Best story ever written, Nellie. It is Nellie, isn't it?'

'It's Kittie, sir. Nellie's the tall one. The girl with the black hair over there.' She nods towards me and he laughs then and turns in his lazy way to look at me. The garden shudders with a sudden breeze as he does and a purple hairstreak butterfly flickers past my face.

Seconds later I bob a foolish curtsy, just like Kittie, then want to kick myself. Escaping, I realise that even though he is lying on his side on the grass, propping his head on his elbow in an appearance of complete relaxation, he is in fact watching me. He is saying something to me! I hurry close to hear him.

'And hot milk would be good too and eggs, if you have them.'

'Yes, sir.'

'On the lawn here in Arcadia would be admirably suitable.'

I glance down again, at his white feet among the three-leafed clover on the springy lawn. Another of his grins then. A grin that – he must know – is like a taper being lit and would melt any girl's skin to liquid wax. I – luckily for him – am not 'any girl'. He is fortunate that I am the good, practical sort with my head screwed tight and that none of his charms will work on *me*. I pick up my tray at once and hasten to the kitchen, to set to coddling the eggs.