Opening Extract from...

Nightingale Wood

Written by Stella Gibbons

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NIGHTINGALE WOOD

Stella Gibbons

Introduced by Sophie Dahl

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INTRODUCTION

'She did not look quite a lady, which was natural; as she was not one.' So wrote Stella Gibbons, author of *Cold Comfort Farm*, as she introduced the heroine of her ninth book, the latterly forgotten treasure, *Nightingale Woo*d. The not quite a lady is grey-eyed Viola Wither, née Thompson, a beguiling widow of twenty-one. Viola is a victim of circumstance, like so many of Gibbons' female protagonists; a shop girl orphan, married briefly to a bumbling, bullying older man, to whom she felt unable to say no at precisely the wrong moment. In his death she is similarly muted, and when, with a sigh of middle-class duty, her in-laws, the aptly named Withers, summon her from London to live with them in their dour house in Essex, she hops on a train in her cheap black coat and pink satin blouse, meek as a sacrificial lamb.

Their house, 'The Eagles', runs thick with thwarted longing. Dwelling there are two daughters, spinsters (in 1930s parlance): the lumpen, unfortunate, thirty-nine-year-old Madge; and Tina, who at thirty-five, with an extreme penchant for dieting, is wasting away in every sense. Their mother, Mrs Wither, seemingly has no fight left in her after four decades with the petty, pedantic patriarch of the family, the hateful Mr Wither. Mr Wither delights in the casual put-down, stamping the most fragile hope in his pitiful daughters with a quick lash of the tongue, forbidding Marge her one desire of a puppy, and tormenting Tina at every opportunity:

'What time did you say Viola's train gets in?' Tina asked her mother; she sometimes found the Wither silences unendurable.
'Half-past twelve, dear.'
'Just in nice time for lunch.'
'Yes.'
'You know perfectly well that Viola's train gets in at half-past twelve,' intoned Mr Wither slowly, raising his eyelids to look at Tina, 'so why ask your mother? You talk for the sake of talking; it's a silly habit.'

It is in this bleak household, in which the clocks are constantly checked to see whether the day is ending, that poor Viola is deposited. And yet . . .

On the other side of the valley is an entirely different house, a house that sings with comfort and luxury, a house that has the feeling of 'moving a little faster than other places, as though it were always on the brink of a party'. This is 'Grassmere', a polished nouveau paradise, home to the dashing Victor Spring. Victor lives with his mother, Mrs Spring, who only employs the comely because, quite simply, 'She hated plain maids; they depressed her', and bookish cousin Hetty, who despises the inertia of a moneyed life, believing 'The Eagles' across the way to contain a life full of 'muted melancholy beauty'. Oh, the grass is always greener.

Add to the cast, amongst others, a ravishing chauffeur living above the Withers' garage, his mother, a faded village beauty with slatternly ways, a Machiavellian millionaire, a fast fairy godmother named Shirley, and a voyeuristic chorus of sorts in the form of a tramp known as 'the Hermit', and you have a sense of the proceedings, because *Nightingale Wood* is, in essence, a sprawling, delightful, eccentric fairy tale.

Gibbons loved this medium, and wrote three books conjuring it in her lifetime: *My American* (1939) borrows from 'The Snow Queen'; *White Sand and Grey Sand* (1958) is influenced by 'Beauty and the Beast'; and *Nightingale Wood*, her first endeavour, makes a great curtsy to 'Cinderella'. Where she strays from the classic fairy

tale in these books, and brilliantly so, is that there is no such thing as staid, straightforward good and evil. Prince Charming is charming, yes, but he's also a little dull, vulgar and complacent. Her Cinderella is beautiful and true, yet a tad apathetic. Each social stratum in *Nightingale Wood* is capable of its own brand of snobbery, which is a theme that permeates all of her books. A greying of characters that are otherwise empathetic stretches to their occasional bigotry, which is deeply jarring to the modern reader. Casual anti-semitism and racism is insidious in much of the fiction from this period, and it serves as a stark commentary on the time. Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Agatha Christie and W. B. Yeats have all been accused of perpetuating this in their work. It is difficult to fathom whether Gibbons herself held such beliefs, or if she was casting judgement (and satirical scorn) upon her culture by making reference to them in her fiction. It is worth noting that these examples are used in conversation, perhaps as a narrative example of the characters' own narrow-mindedness. To edit them out would be a denial, and so, uncomfortable as it is to stumble upon them, they remain as a harrowing reminder of what went before.

It is staggering for a writer with an archive spanning twenty-five novels, four volumes of poetry and three volumes of short stories, to be best (and sometimes solely) known for one work. *Cold Comfort Farm* was Stella Gibbons' first novel, published in 1932, when she was thirty. She had grown up in a family similar to the ones she parodied so well: she was middle class, educated, and her father was a doctor. In their local community of Kentish Town he was publicly lauded for his humanity; in private, he was a domineering and violent man. Such roots must have had a profound impact on her, regardless of her career trajectory, but to my mind they also tattoo her writing: the men in her books are regarded somewhat warily, whatever their station, and she writes of a woman's plight with sensitivity, buckets of humour, and ceaseless compassion. The women of *Nightingale Wood* each suffer suffocating consequences of their sex. Perhaps the most succinct surmisal of the 1930s female lot comes from Viola's best friend, Shirley, who says wryly, 'Vote, Marie [Stopes], perms, and all, we can't do anything.'

But with the shadows we have light, and, again, it is testament to the wily talent of Gibbons to dance between the two with her light touch. One realises that *Nightingale Wood* doesn't have just one heroine; it has many, and each is duly rewarded for her pains. There is romance galore: a transformative dress and a ball; much dizzy kissing in hedgerows and beyond; spying, retribution and runaways; fights and a fire; poetry and heartbreak; a few weddings *and* a funeral; and a fairy-tale ending with a twist.

What luxury to stumble upon this quirky book, and the fascinating modern woman who wrote it. It is a rare unadulterated pleasure, and high time for its encore.

Without further ado – I give you *Nightingale Wood*.

Sophie Dahl, 2008

CHAPTER I

It is difficult to make a dull garden, but old Mr Wither had succeeded.

He himself did no work in the grounds of his house near Chesterbourne in Essex, but his lack of interest in them and his dislike of spending money influenced the gardener. The result was a poorish lawn and a plaster rockery with very little in it extending as far as the eye could reach, and a lot of boring shrubs which Mr Wither liked because they filled up space and gave little trouble. He also liked the garden to look tidy, and on a fine April morning he stood at the breakfast-room window thinking what a nuisance the daisies were. There were eleven of them, out in the middle of the lawn. Saxon must be told to get them up.

Mrs Wither came in, but he took no notice of her because he had seen her before. She sat down behind the cups as a gong sounded in the hall, and Mr Wither heavily crossed the room and took his place at the other end, opening the *Morning Post*. Mrs Wither passed him a cup of tea and a bowl of patent cereal smelling and tasting exactly like all the other patent cereals, and three minutes passed. Mrs Wither sipped her tea, gazing over Mr Wither's bald head streaked with two bands of hair at a blackbird strutting under the monkey-puzzle tree.

Mr Wither looked slowly up.

'The girls are late.'

'They're just coming, dear.'

'They're late. They know perfectly well I don't like them to be late for meals.'

'I know, dear, but Madge overslept, she was so stiff after the tennis yesterday, and Tina's just trying—'

'Fiddling about with her hair as usual, I suppose.'

Mr Wither returned to his paper and Mrs Wither went on gazing and sipping.

Madge, their elder daughter, came in rubbing her hands.

'Morning, Mum. Sorry I'm late, Father.'

Mr Wither did not reply, and she sat down. She was thirty-nine years old, a big woman in a tweed coat and skirt with strong features, a closely shingled head and fresh yet insipid colouring.

'How can you eat that sawdust, Father?' she inquired, beginning on eggs and bacon and speaking cheerfully because it was a fine morning and only ten minutes past nine; and somehow, at the beginning of every new day, there was always a chance that this one might be different from all the rest. Something might happen; and then everything would be jollier all round.

Madge did not see clearly into her feelings; she only knew that she always felt cheerier at breakfast than at tea.

Mrs Wither smiled faintly. Mr Wither said nothing.

Footsteps came draggingly yet hastily across the tiled hall, and in hurried Tina, her eyelids pink, her dull hair arranged in its usual downward wave on her forehead. She was a little person, with eyes and mouth too big for her thin face. She was thirty-five; and dressed with evident pleasure to herself in a green suit and a white ruffled blouse. The nails of her small fingers were painted pale pink.

'Morning, everybody; I'm sorry I'm late, Father.'

Mr Wither uncrossed his plump legs in unexpected trousers of a natty checked cloth, and crossed them again, but did not look up. Her mother smiled at Tina, murmuring:

'Very nice, dear.'

'What is?' Mr Wither suddenly fixed Tina with a bloodshot, drooping and pale-blue eye.

'Only my new – only my suit, Father.'

'New, is it?'

'Yes – I – yes.'

'What do you want to go buying more clothes for? You've got plenty.' And Mr Wither returned to the City page.

'Bacon, Tina?'

'Please.'

'One, or two, dear?'

'Oh, one, please. No – that little one. Thank you.'

'You don't eat enough. It doesn't suit you to be thin,' observed Madge, buttering toast. 'Can't think why you want to diet at all; you look washed-out.'

'Well, you can only go by how you feel, and I know I feel miles better—'

'*Miles* better? How can you feel miles better?' loudly demanded Mr Wither, putting down the *Morning Post* and staring severely at his younger daughter. 'A mile is a measure of length. It cannot be used to describe a condition of the human body. You can be much better, or considerably better, or noticeably better. You cannot be *miles* better, because such a thing is impossible.'

'Well then,' Tina's dry hands slowly ground over each other in her lap as she tremulously smiled, 'I feel *considerably* better since I started the Brash Diet.'

Her smile showed irregular teeth, but sweetened her face surprisingly and made her look younger.

'Well, all I can say is you don't look it, does she, Father?'

Silence. The blackbird gave a loud sweet squawk and flew away.

'Are you playing golf today, dear?' presently murmured Mrs Wither to Madge. Madge, with her mouth full, nodded.

'Shall you be in to lunch?' pursued her mother – cautiously.

'Depends.'

'You must know whether you will be in to lunch or not, Madge,' interrupted Mr Wither, who had suddenly observed in the City page a piece of news which had blackened for him a world that was never very fair. 'Can you not definitely tell your mother whether you will, or will not, be in?'

' 'Fraid not, Father' said Madge firmly, wiping her mouth. 'Give us the sporting page, will you, if you've finished with it.'

Mr Wither detached the sporting page and passed it to her in silence, letting the rest of the paper drift listlessly to the floor.

No one said anything. The blackbird came back.

A purple-black and louring mantle of gloom now lay over Mr Wither. Before reading that piece in the paper, he had been as he always was at breakfast, and at luncheon and tea and dinner as well. But now (thought Mrs Wither and Madge and Tina) Father was Worrying; and the rest of the day would be darkened.

Mr Wither's chief worry was his money, of which he had some two thousand eight hundred pounds a year. This was the interest upon a handsome capital left to him by his father from a private gas company, established towards the middle of the last century, in which the late Mr Wither had held most of the shares.

During his own working life, Mr Wither the younger, knowing little about gas but a good deal about frightening people and getting his own way, had bossed the gas company with some success: and at the age of sixty-five (five years ago) he sold his shares, invested the proceeds, and retired to relish his leisure at The Eagles, near Chesterbourne, Essex, where he had already lived for thirty years.

Mr Wither's investments were as safe as investments ever are in this world; but that was not safe enough for Mr Wither. He wanted them to be *quite* safe; immovably productive, stable as rock and certain as nightfall.

It was no use; up and down they went, influenced by wars and births, abdications and airports. He never could be sure what his money was up to. He would wake up in the night and lie in the dark wondering what was happening to it, and during the day he prowled uneasily after it in the financial columns of the Press.

He was not mean (he often told himself) but he detested to see money wasted. It gave him strong pain to spend money without a strong cause. Money was not Given to us to spend; it was Given to us to save.

Now, as he sat gazing hopelessly at his half-finished cereal, he remembered all the good money he had been persuaded into wasting. How he had disliked paying away all those fees for the girls, during the ten years when they had tried to have careers! Pounds

and pounds and pounds thrown away, good money sent after bad. Art schools and domestic schools, barbola work and secretarial college elocution lessons and journalism courses, kennel-work and weaving. None of it any use, of course; all of it wickedly expensive, and what could the girls *do*, as a result of all the money that he had spent upon them?

Nothing. Mr Wither considered them to be ill-informed and inaccurate in their speech, muddled in their thinking, and useless with their hands. He had a vague feeling that Tina and Madge, having been taught so much at so high a price, ought to have been, like Sir Francis Bacon, possessed of universal knowledge; but somehow it had not worked out that way.

'What time did you say Viola's train gets in?' Tina asked her mother; she sometimes found the Wither silences unendurable.

'Half-past twelve, dear.'

'Just in nice time for lunch.'

'Yes.'

'You know perfectly well that Viola's train gets in at half-past twelve,' intoned Mr Wither slowly, raising his eyelids to look at Tina, 'so why ask your mother? You talk for the sake of talking, it's a silly habit.' He slowly looked down again at his little bowl of mushy cereal.

'I'd forgotten,' said Tina. She continued vivaciously, at the silence. 'Don't you *loathe* getting to a place before twelve o'clock, Madge – too late for breakfast and too early for lunch?'

No one spoke: and she remembered that she had said the same thing last night at dinner, when the time of Viola's arrival had been threshed out with a rousing argument about the times of trains between Mr Wither and Madge. She flushed slowly, and ground her hands together again. Breakfast was being awful, as usual. Never mind, her new suit was really becoming, and Viola was coming today; that would make a little change, and Viola's presence might prevent Father from Worrying so much and so often, and Madge from arguing with him so rudely. Viola was not an exciting person, but anyone's company, even that of a sister-in-law, was better than that of unadulterated Relations.

After reading a book on feminine psychology called *Selene's Daughters* borrowed from a school friend, Tina had decided to face the facts about her own nature, however disgusting, nay, appalling, those facts might be (the book warned its readers that the truth about themselves might disgust, nay, appal them); and one of the facts she had faced was that she did not love her family.

She had not even loved her only brother, Teddy; and that *was* rather appalling, because, for three months, Teddy had been dead.

Viola was his widow, a bride of a year, who was coming to make her home with her husband's family at The Eagles. Whenever Tina realized that she had not loved Teddy, it made her feel worse to remember that Viola, a very young girl with plenty of young men to choose from, had chosen Teddy and loved him enough to marry him. I suppose I'm unnatural, thought Tina. Of course, we never saw much of Teddy after he was grown up. He never shared his life with us, as some men do with their sisters and parents. All the same, I must be abnormal, not to have loved my only brother.

'Want me to drive you up to the station, Mum?' offered Madge, standing at the door.

'You won't be back in time, will you, dear?'

'That doesn't matter; I'll come back, if you'd like me to run you up.'

Madge loved to drive the car, but as Mr Wither said that she did not know how to, she seldom got the chance.

'Well, thank you, dear, but I've told Saxon now. He'll bring it round about ten past twelve.'

'Oh all right, if you prefer Saxon's driving to mine.'

'It isn't that, dear. And I think Saxon really drives quite nicely now.'

'So I should hope, after two cautions, a new mudguard and a fine.'

She went out whistling, and Mrs Wither stooped for the paper, but Mr Wither, as though absently, stretched out his hand for it, and she let him have it.

'Are you going to practise, Tina?' she asked, putting her hand on her daughter's thin shoulder on the way to the door.

'I suppose so.'

'Ought to go out,' pronounced Mr Wither, coming to the surface of his gloom like a seal for air. 'Mooning indoors won't do you any good,' and he submerged again.

Mrs Wither went out.

Tina crossed to the window and stood for a little while, looking up at the brilliantly white clouds behind the black-green branches of the monkey-puzzle. The world looked so young this morning that it made her very skin feel withered; she was conscious of every creamed and massaged wrinkle in her face, and of her hardening bones; and all she longed for, and the only thing she cared to think about on this young, light-flooded earth, was Love.

Mr Wither went out of the room, crossed the cold blue and black tiles of the hall, and shut himself into his own snuffy den, a little room furnished with a worn carpet, a large ugly desk, financial books of reference, and a huge fireplace which gave out a hellish heat when lit, which was not often.

This morning, however, it was lit. Mr Wither had not made up his mind in a hurry about ordering it to be lit; he had thought the matter well over, and decided that the fire would not be wasted, though an alarmingly large quantity of coal must be burned if the hellish one were not to go out about half-past two in the afternoon.

Mr Wither intended to invite Viola into his den after lunch and have a little talk with her, and he thought that she might be easier to talk to if she were warmed. Women were continually grumbling about being cold.

It disturbed Mr Wither to think of a silly young girl like Viola having control of her own money. True, she could not have very much; when the money that her father had left her was added to the money that Teddy had left her, she could not have (thought Mr Wither, sitting upright in his baggy-seated old black leather arm-chair and gazing sadly into the furious fire) more than, say, a hundred and fifty pounds a year. But even a hundred and fifty pounds a year ought to be properly looked after, and Mr Wither and his financial adviser, Major-General E. E. Breis-Cumwitt, DSO, were certainly more fitted to look after it than was Viola.

If Mr Wither had had his way, he would have known how much money Viola possessed, but at the time of his son's death, circumstances had conspired to keep him from finding out.

To begin with, Teddy had always been irritatingly secretive about money (as, indeed, he was about all his affairs) and his father, though he knew how much he earned, did not know how much he saved. Every fortnight or so, during Teddy's lifetime, Mr Wither asked Teddy if he were saving money, and Teddy said, 'Yes, of course, Father,' and changed the subject. He refused to answer direct questions about How Much and What In; he retorted that that was his affair. Nevertheless, his father had assumed that he did save something.

Then, when he died suddenly of pneumonia, Mr Wither had been unable to go to the funeral (which took place in London, at Viola's wish), much less investigate his son's estate and take over its management, as he wanted to do, because he was at the time helpless with a sharp go of lumbago.

But he did know that there had been no Will, and this made him uneasy.

He wrote to Viola; he wrote two longish, earnest letters about the Money. He received in reply one short, vague little note saying that she was 'going to stay with Shirley, a friend,' and giving no address.

Mrs Wither said that Shirley's other name was Davis and that she lived in a place called Golders Green.

Mr Wither went to the trouble of looking up all the Davises in the London Telephone Directory, Golders Green was creeping with them, so that was no use.

He wrote another longish letter, to his son's old address, and at last had a short reply, giving the Davis address, and saying nothing about the Money but vaguely mentioning difficulties about letting the flat.

Then Mr Wither wrote once more, for the last time, saying nothing this time about the money but announcing firmly that his daughter-in-law must come at once to live at The Eagles.

It was the only thing to do. While Viola was in London, there was no hope of his being able to manage her money for her, and the

idea of it, knocking about on its own like that, was beginning to get on his nerves. The fact that he did not know how much it was made matters worse. Why, it might be three hundred a year!

He thought Viola a silly, common little girl, but did not actually dislike her. Of course it was a pity, a great pity, that she had been a shopgirl, but after all, her father had owned half the business in which she was employed and it was a solid little business, long established and well patronized. That was all to the good; Mr Wither liked to feel money on all sides of him, like a stout fence; he liked to feel that his remotest cousin four times removed had a bit put by (as, indeed, all the Wither cousins had).

No, he would not mind Viola coming to live at The Eagles. It was a large house; he would not often see her. When he did see her, she could be organized. And then he would be able to manage Teddy's money for her, and see that it did not get spent or otherwise misused. It would make a nice hobby for her, too. She would follow his wise administration of her little income with interest throughout the years, growing wiser and (he hoped) more organizable as she grew older.

She was just the sort of characterless girl that Mr Wither had always expected Teddy to marry. This did not prevent him from being very annoyed when Teddy did. What with Madge and Tina not marrying at all, and Teddy marrying a shopgirl, and Mrs Wither being so disappointed about all three of her children's reactions to marriage, Mr Wither was quite sick of the word.

But Teddy never had been ambitious. Mr Wither had put him into a job, minor but with prospects, in the gas company, when he was twenty-two, and it was understood that he would work his way Up (where to was glossed over).

But there Teddy had stayed for twenty years, his salary rising by five pounds a year because everybody's salary in that company below a certain level did so automatically. It was not as though he had been content, either, with his minor job in which he earned so little money that Mr Wither was quite ashamed to think about it. Mr Wither was frequently told by friends of the family that of course Teddy's real Dream had been of doing architecture or painting or

something artistic; and these Dreams, always popping up at Mr Wither, annoyed him very much.

He was sure that his acquaintances said, behind his back, that he ought to pay Teddy more money. But this he would not do, for many good reasons. Teddy did not deserve more money; nobody holding that job ever had had more money and he must not show favouritism to his son; Teddy did not need more money because he was not married, and so on.

When at last Teddy did marry, at the age of forty-one, Mr Wither was in the happy position of not being able to raise his salary, for by that time he had sold out his interest in the company. He gave his son an allowance of eighty pounds a year, saying that this would be a help. But when Teddy had enjoyed the use of this for a year, he died, and Mr Wither was able to take it all back again.

Mr Wither, gazing vaguely into the fire, mused that some fellows were very cut up when their sons died. Now, he had not been very cut up when Teddy died. It was a shock; of course, it was a shock. But it was strange that he had not been more cut up. Never had got on with Teddy, somehow, even when Teddy was a boy. Through his mind drifted the word 'Milksop'. Yet there must have been something in the chap for a girl like Viola, quite a pretty girl, who must have known plenty of chaps and had plenty of choice, to pick him out and marry him.

Not that it wasn't a very fine thing for her; she knew which side her bread was buttered, no doubt, thought Mr Wither, sitting upright, frowning and nodding. And this afternoon he and Viola would have a little talk.

Meanwhile, he must telephone to Major-General Breis-Cumwitt about that dismal piece of news on the City page, which he had carefully encircled with a sable ring.

Not that Major-General Breis-Cumwitt could do anything; no power on earth could stop money when it began to jig about like that, but at least the two of them could confer, and discuss; and condole; and then Mr Wither (despite the one and threepence spent on a telephone call to London) would feel better.

At ten minutes past twelve exactly the car came round the short circular drive, and stopped in front of the house.

The chauffeur sat with his beautiful profile turned carefully from the house; a correct chauffeur does not peer up at the bedroom windows, scan the front door, nor appear aware of anything at all, and Saxon was most correct. The Eagles was a house of dark grey stucco, too tall for the grounds in which it stood, so that it seemed to stoop over them in a frightening way. There were more boring shrubs round the front door, approached by a good many steep steps. The windows on the lower floors were hung with heavy dark curtains; the upper ones had those half-curtains of white material with bits of coarse lace let into them which always suggest the windows of a nursing home, and also that the bedrooms are large and draughty.

Two plaster birds, not badly modelled, sat on the two columns at the entrance to the drive and gave the house its name. These birds got on Mr Wither's nerves for some reason, but he was afraid to ask how much it would cost to have them taken away; also, the house had belonged to his father, and he had a vague feeling that the eagles ought to be left there because his father had approved them, so there they sat.

Saxon knew the exact instant that Mrs Wither appeared at the door, though he was not looking at the house, and he stepped from the car and deftly opened its door for her, touching his cap.

'Good morning, Saxon. Isn't it a beautiful day!'

'Good morning, Madam. Yes, Madam.'

'So nice for Mrs Theodore,' continued Mrs Wither, having her toes muffled by Saxon in a horrid old rug of unknown fur which Mr Wither refused to have put out of commission. 'To come to us on a nice day, I mean.'

'Yes, Madam.'

Mrs Wither, who had once been a woman who enjoyed talking to servants, glanced at him and said no more. Saxon did not seem to like being talked to.

The gentle reader is no doubt wondering why on earth anyone should have married Mr Wither, and must here be told that she had married him for what (it is said) is a common enough reason:

she feared that she would never have the chance to marry anyone else.

And when he was young Mr Wither had not been quite so bad; he had had a bold eye and a semi-dashing manner rather like that of a small bull-dog. He ordered waiters about, elbowed himself into hansom cabs and had a rich father. Mrs Wither, who was not romantic, had thought that a young woman might safely trust herself to Arthur Wither, and she had done so. Their marriage cannot have been so bad as some, for here they were, at seventy and sixty-four, sharing The Eagles, two daughters, the memory of a dead son, and a daughter-in-law.

Mrs Wither was sorry for poor Arthur; he worried so. She wondered and grieved about him in his absence, and though she always enjoyed herself when he was not there and never when he was, she was fond of him; and Mr Wither in his turn disapproved of Mrs Wither less than he did of anybody, though he never showed it.

What exalted lies are told of marriage! but one promise at least can be fulfilled: ye shall be one flesh.