

# THE LIE COME TRUE

*Just a Wee Fairy Story in an English Setting*

By E. NESBIT

DOWN the green vista of the woodland ride pale primroses shone—in the deeper tangle of the wood itself wild flowers hung their white faces over the thick fallen leaves of last year's oak and hazel and sweet chestnut. The wood's end was fringed with the pale blue violets that love the chalk—and, in the meadow beyond the wood daffodils blazed round the roots of old trees planted long years ago by hands now long since dead.

The young man came down the wood drunk with beauty. It was five years since he had seen an English spring. A boy with the soul of a poet and the dumb lips of a child, he had at the usual age been asked what he would be. And since the insides of engines interest every boy, poet or not poet, and since you cannot say to an eminent Uncle, in the City, "If you please I will be a poet," he had said, "I will be an engineer," and now for ten years he had been it. And five years of those had been spent among the floods and fields of North America, where spring is only the end of winter, and not the miraculous resurrection of the world's desire.

Now another Uncle had died—Uncle Horace, whom he had always disliked—and Uncle Horace had left him money and the house where he had played as a boy, in his grandfather's time—a garden and fields and woods and cottages, almost a village—in fact, an estate. And he was come to take possession, walking through his kingdom for the first time. The birds were singing, a whole loud orchestra of them, and his heart was singing, too. The birds, no doubt, were singing love songs, or songs of the domestic affections, but the song in Mr. Chancton's heart was a song without a subject. It was, indeed, perhaps less a song than a prelude. One does not live to twenty-nine without some emotional experiences, and he had been in love as he called it—knowing no better—more than once. But the experiences had been curiously disappointing and incredibly unlike the love that poets sang about, the love that wrecks empires and transfigures life. Not one of the pretty girls who had aroused the interest he called love had transfigured more than five minutes of life—and the thought of their inspiring anything that could wreck a Board of Guardians, let alone an empire, refused to present itself as anything but nonsense. Thus, at twenty-nine, he was free—with a heart swept and garnished, and the poet in him, which is the child, too, looked down the vista of brown and green and purple to where the daffodils blazed in the field beyond the shadow and wished—as children wish for the moon—that the Lady of Dreams might come through the wood to meet him, with daffodils in her hands and the light of the world in her eyes.

And then, you know, she came. Life that day was in a bounteous mood. Perhaps happiness attracts happiness. The caged bird singing in the heart decoys the wild, free bird, and they sing together.

She came towards him along one of the narrow paths that intersect the broad green rides. And there were daffodils in her hands; and in her eyes—but he could not see her eyes. Her lips, however, he saw, and her chin, and the soft rose and white of her face, her black hair turning to gold where the sun struck it. Her eyes were downcast, and she did not see him.

The sudden wonder of his granted wish struck him like a blow.

He stood still, and waited breathlessly, for her to draw near—to pass—to disappear, so that perhaps he should never see her again. Even while he refused to face this thought something in him, in that dark workshop where effective resolutions are forged, was shaping a weapon.

AND her bright hair, and the lavender gown, and the hat she carried in the hand that had no daffodils, all came nearer and nearer—he heard the sound of her feet on the dead moss and leaves—she was close to him—she was level with him—she had passed. . . . No; for in the instant of her passing he spoke.

"Forgive me," he said, "but can you tell me the way to Chancton Moat?"

Chancton Moat was the house that his uncle had left him. But what else was he to say? The house and the station were the only two places of which he could remember enough even to ask his way to them.

She stopped—and now he saw her eyes.

"It's more than a mile away," she said. "You were on the right way. But it's shut up, you know."

"Yes," he said, "I know."

He deeply desired to appear uninterested, and succeeded merely in seeming surly.

"I beg your pardon," she said, her chin a shade higher, "the house is to let—I believe."

He jumped at this. "Yes," he said, "I suppose there's a caretaker, or a servant, or someone—I could get the key?"

"I don't think there's a caretaker," she said.

"Then it's no use my going on," said he, "I suppose I had better ask you the way to the station."

"Oh, but that seems a pity," she said, and hesitated.

"I might go and have a look at the outside of the place," he said—"you were going that way—would you mind if I went with you so far as our ways lie together. 'It's not impertinence,' he added, hastily—"but it seems so silly. I've been away from England five years in places where there are no manners. How splendid if everything had changed while I was away, and it was no longer right for me to raise my hat and let you go, and then follow along the same path a few yards behind, just because I've never been introduced to you."

She laughed. "What do you do when you meet another man in the places where there are no manners? Exchange cards?"

"No—you just begin to talk, and after a bit your names come out somehow without your knowing it."

She laughed again. "Let us do that, then. And pretend that this is the wild world where there are no manners. How do you begin to talk in that world?"

"The one who's got a drink offers it to the other chap," said he, walking by her side.

"I see: the one who's got something the other wants offers it to the one who wants it. But suppose it was awkward to explain how the drink came into your possession?"

"You'd offer it just the same. The other chap wouldn't ask questions. And if he did—well, you know what our nurses used to tell us—"

"You'd lie to conceal the secret story of how you got the drink?"

"Certainly, if necessary," he said, coolly.

"Tell me some more about the world where there are no manners," she said. "Are there lions in it? And crocodiles and natives dressed in thatch, with the heads of their enemies hanging round their houses like Chinese lanterns?"

The descriptive touch charmed him; he answered to it as to a spur, and before the mile was out she had heard more of his adventures than had really happened to him. The house came in sight, a big, white, squarish house, among trees, separated from its park only by a sunk fence. She led the way to a gate at the side of the house. It was padlocked.

"But I can lift it off its hinges, of course," he said, and did.

"So few people really understand gates," she sighed appreciatively, as she passed through.

THEY went round the house, and noted the green trellis on its southern side, where the bronze jasmine shoots were preparing for their starry summer—the green seat round the cedar, and the dark buds of the weeping ash that made an arbour on the lawn. They tried to peep through the windows, but all were whitely shuttered like the eyes of the dead.

"It's a nice old place," he said, at last.

"Yes—isn't it?" said she.

"I wish we could have got in," he said. "I ought to have remembered to arrange for that."

"When you give the other man the drink he doesn't ask where you got it," she said, and held out her hand with a key in it. "The side door," she said. "And now good-bye—"

"But how am I to give you the key again?" he asked.

"You can keep it," she said.

"But, please," said he. And for a moment they stood looking at each other.

"I ought to go," she said at last.

"But why?"

"But why not?"

"In the world where there are no manners," he said, "you can't give a man a drink, and not stay and see him drink it. It's considered to be in the worst possible taste."

"Oh—there's taste there, then?"

"There's taste everywhere," he said. "I say, do come over the house with me. I do think I deserve it. I haven't asked a single question, but I can't help thinking that you've been here before. There's a Sherlock Holmes in us all."

"You are quite right," she owned. "I have."

"Well, then, come on," he said, boyishly, "this door?" And next moment they were in a flagged kitchen. He tried to open the shutters, fumbling—

"Up," she said. "Press the catch up."

Spring light flooded a staid and orderly kitchen, neat as a sealed vault where not even time has entered. They went along a passage, and through a green baize door, symbol and sign of a household whose elegant leisure is cast off from the sounds and scents of domestic toil—and so to the parlours, panelled and pleasant, and to the study, a sunny room with demure yet graceful furnishings. Not a man's room.

"My lady's boudoir," he said, and stopped on the threshold. "How bright and neat it all is. No dust anywhere, it only wants flowers." He opened the window, and leaning out plucked a handful of wall-flowers from the border outside. He found her

standing with a brown lustre mug full of water in her hand, and a pitcher of old willow pattern.

"I'll put my daffodils too," she said. "The old house will be awfully pleased."

She had echoed his thought. Another thought pressed behind it. Where had she been taking those daffodils? There was a little pause: he put his flowers in water, and set them on the mantelpiece, hers went on the window ledge.

"You've put them in exactly the right place," said she. "Do you think you shall take the place?"

"Would you take it if you were me?"

"Yes—but then—I don't know why I shouldn't tell you. I have lived here all my life." There was that in her voice that made him say gently:

"Tell me, won't you?"

THESE'S nothing to tell. Mr. Chancton was a relation of ours, and my mother and I lived with him, and he told mother he had made a will and left her everything. And when he died they found he hadn't."

"But are you—is your mother—I mean—I suppose you're well off, and all that?"

"We're not paupers. But it's the house. We've taken root here—how can we bear to live anywhere else. We're staying at the inn in the village—just so as to come up and see it every day. When the man comes back, if he doesn't want to live in it, we thought of asking to be caretakers—we couldn't afford to rent it, but if it's going to be let that's all over," said she. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. And you guessed about the daffodils. I was coming up to put them here—because I hate to think of the house being left all alone. He's left the money to some wretched nephew he's not seen since he was a boy, and mother had done everything for him, for years. He was a dear, too. I can't think how he can have done it. I suppose he forgot."

"Has the will been looked for?"

"Of course it has. Mother and I looked everywhere—and so did the lawyers. The will they did find was made nearly thirty years ago, and the lawyers had got it poked away somewhere. But my will—they never found that."

"I stayed here when I was a boy," he said, "and I remember—"

Like a man in a dream he went across the room, and lifted out a row of books from one of the mahogany shelves. Then another, and another. Then he drew the shelves out, and fumbled in the dark hollow—a latch clicked, and the book-shelves swung back, leaving a larger, darker hollow.

"This is the secret door," he said. "Didn't you know it? I expect we shall find your will here."

"But I've never seen this," she said, breathlessly.

HE murmured something about the men of the family as he lit the candles in the two branched silver candlesticks from the mantelpiece. Still deep in that dream he went down into the little dark room—dark it was, and the dust lay thick and soft like a carpet on its floor. She followed him stricken to a shamed silence.

There was a table in the middle of the room—and a cupboard in the corner. It was locked, but he forced it open. He knew now, quite well, what he would find. And he found it. He lifted out three bundles of papers, and laid them on the table. The fourth thing he touched he looked at, unfolded, read a little in it, and held it out to her.

"Here," he said, "is your will. You get everything. Don't—don't . . ." For she was trembling and holding her hands before her face. He took her by the arm, and led her up into the sunny room where the wall-flowers and the daffodils were. He made her sit down, he spoke gently and reassuringly, as to a child.

"It's all right," he said, "don't—please don't. The house is yours, and the village and the fields where the daffodils are, and the primrose woods and the jasmine trellis. Can't you be glad yet? Try."

"But, oh," she said in a little voice behind her hands, "it isn't that—it isn't that. Oh, this is horrible. Are you sure? About the will, I mean?"

"Quite." His beautiful kingdom lay round him in bits, like a broken crystal. But there would be plenty of time to think about that. But she, who had been a dream, and the world's wonder, was now an heiress. For engineers with very moderate incomes one course alone is honourably open—to fly—to put the world between themselves and heiresses.

"I must go," he said in his turn, and now she, in her turn, said, "No, no."

"But, yes," said he. "Come. Let us lock the house up: you will want to get back to your mother and tell her the good news."

"But there oughtn't to be any good news," she cried, "it was all lies. He never promised to leave us anything. Only mother thought he would let us stay in the house. He wasn't my uncle. Mother was his housekeeper, and he paid for me to go to school and college and—"

"Well—never mind," he said awkwardly.

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