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Horror Stories

Written by E. Nesbit

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Horror Stories

E. NESBIT

With an introduction by
Naomi Alderman

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001

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Set in 11/13 pt Bembo Book MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–26177–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

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Horror Stories

E. Nesbit was born in Surrey in 1858. A world-famous children's author, her works include *The Railway Children* and *Five Children and It*. She also wrote several short stories for adults. With her husband, Hubert Bland, she was one of the founding members of the socialist Fabian Society; their household became a centre of the socialist and literary circles of the times. She died in 1924.

Naomi Alderman is the author of three novels: *Disobedience*, *The Lessons* and *The Liars' Gospel*. She has won the Orange Award for New Writers and the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award, and each of her literary novels has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4's *Book at Bedtime*. She was selected for *Granta*'s once-a-decade list of Best of Young British Novelists, Waterstone's Writers for the Future, and was mentored by Margaret Atwood as part of the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. She presents *Science Stories* on BBC Radio 4, is Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University and she is the co-creator and lead writer of the bestselling smartphone audio adventure app *Zombies, Run!*. She lives in London.

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Introduction

by Naomi Alderman

Those of us who grew up with E. Nesbit's wonderful novels for children – *The Railway Children*, *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet* – may be surprised to learn that she wrote ghost stories for adults. And it might be even more surprising to encounter some of the grim underpinnings of these delicious fireside tales. Lurking in the background of some of these stories are dead children, thwarted love, jealousy, vengeance and the sense that even the best kind of love – the famous love that never falters, the love that pays the price – has something dark lurking within it.

'This is not an artistically rounded-off ghost story,' says the narrator of 'The Shadow', 'and nothing is explained in it, and there seems to be no reason why any of it should have happened.' Which of course begs the reader to ask themselves what the explanation for the story is, and why any of it should have happened. There is a young couple, very much in love, expecting their first baby. And there is Miss Eastwich, a woman so silent that the children she looks after later in life never think of treating her as 'other than a machine'. She tells her story of the 'shadow' that crept into the house of her two friends whom she had 'loved more than anything in the world' and who had married each other. The narrator understands, as does the reader, that Miss Eastwich had trusted her best friend Mabel – one half of that connubial bliss – not to take the man she loved, but Mabel had taken him anyway. And then what happens? Well, there's a 'shadow'. Is Miss Eastwich the shadow? Is she the one responsible for all that happens in the house? Take a look at the story and see what you think.

The darkness teems at the corners of these stories, like that gathering shadow – ordinary callousness turning into something more disturbing. 'There'll be more wedding tomorrow than ever you'll take the first part in,' snarls the narrator of 'John Charrington's Wedding' to his spinster sister – another man so consumed with jealousy that he sneaks around eavesdropping on the happy couple. What happens to them reads as a dark enactment of his deepest wishes. The nurse narrator of 'The Violet Car' – presented with a couple who each claim the other is the mad one in need of her care – mentions with cool appraisal 'that importance, that conscious competence, that one feels in the presence of other people's troubles'. The whole story is concerned with the complicated business of apportioning blame, guilt and justice. A lot of inconvenient people are got rid of in these stories, one way or another; and they're more disquieting than they seem at first read.

But of course, it was always so. Nesbit's stories for children are always prefigured by adult sadness – it's just that she never made the children look in that direction. Think of the father of the railway children, sent to prison after being falsely accused of spying. Think of the smug and awful young man that the Lamb turns into in *Five Children and It*. Nesbit had always known that adults could be rapacious, contemptuous, malicious and sadistic – her own biography includes an adulterous husband who got one of her dearest friends pregnant. She knew about anger, hatred and sexual jealousy. And in these very chilling grown-up stories she lets the knowledge out that she held back so carefully in her work for children.

Hurst of Hurstcote

We were at Eton together, and afterwards at Christ Church, and I always got on very well with him; but somehow he was a man about whom none of the other men cared very much. There was always something strange and secret about him; even at Eton he liked grubbing among books and trying chemical experiments better than cricket or the boats. That sort of thing would make any boy unpopular. At Oxford, it wasn't merely his studious ways and his love of science that went against him; it was a certain habit he had of gazing at us through narrowing lids, as though he were looking at us more from the outside than any human being has a right to look at any other, and a bored air of belonging to another and a higher race, whenever we talked the ordinary chatter about athletics and the Schools.

A wild paper on 'Black Magic', which he read to the Essay Society, filled to overflowing the cup of his College's contempt for him. I suppose no man was ever so much disliked for so little cause.

When we went down I noticed – for I knew his people at home – that the sentiment of dislike which he excited in most men was curiously in contrast to the emotions which he inspired in women. They all liked him, listened to him with rapt attention, talked of him with undisguised enthusiasm. I watched their strange infatuation with calmness for several years, but the day came when he met Kate Danvers, and then I was not calm any more. She behaved like all the rest of the women, and to her, quite suddenly, Hurst threw the handkerchief. He was not Hurst of Hurstcote then, but his family was good, and his means not despicable, so he and she were conditionally engaged. People said it was a poor match for the beauty of the county; and her people, I know, hoped she would think better of it. As for me – well, this is not the story of my life, but of his. I need only say that I thought him a lucky man.

I went to town to complete the studies that were to make me MD; Hurst went abroad, to Paris or Leipzig or somewhere, to study hypnotism and prepare notes for his book on 'Black Magic'. This came out in the autumn, and had a strange and brilliant success. Hurst became famous, famous as men do become nowadays. His writings were asked for by all the big periodicals. His future seemed assured. In the spring they were married; I was not present at the wedding. The practice my father had bought for me in London claimed all my time, I said.

It was more than a year after their marriage that I had a letter from Hurst.

> Congratulate me, old man! Crowds of uncles and cousins have died, and I am Hurst of Hurstcote, which God wot I never thought to be. The place is all to pieces, but we can't live anywhere else. If you can get away about September, come down and see us. We shall be installed. I have everything now that I ever longed for – Hurstcote – cradle of our race – and all that, the only woman in the world for my wife, and – But that's enough for any man, surely.
>
> JOHN HURST OF HURSTCOTE

Of course I knew Hurstcote. Who does not? Hurstcote, which seventy years ago was one of the most perfect, as well as the finest, brick Tudor mansions in England. The Hurst who lived there seventy years ago noticed one day that his chimneys smoked, and called in a Hastings architect. 'Your chimneys,' said the local man, 'are beyond me, but with the timbers and lead of your castle I can build you a snug little house in the corner of your park, much more suitable for a residence than this old brick building.' So they gutted Hurstcote, and built the new house, and faced it with stucco. All of which things you will find written in the Guide to Sussex. Hurstcote, when I had seen it, had been the merest shell. How would Hurst make it habitable? Even if he had inherited much money with the castle, and intended to restore the building, that would be a work of years, not months. What would he do?

In September I went to see.

Hurst met me at Pevensey Station.

'Let's walk up,' he said; 'there's a cart to bring your traps. Eh, but it's good to see you again, Bernard!'

It was good to see him again. And to see him so changed. And so changed for good, too. He was much stouter, and no longer wore the untidy ill-fitting clothes of the old days. He was rather smartly got up in grey stockings and knee-breeches, and wore a velvet shooting-jacket. But the most noteworthy change was in his face; it bore no more the eager, inquiring, half-scornful, half-tolerant look that had won him such ill-will at Oxford. His face now was the face of a man completely at peace with himself and with the world.

'How well you look!' I said, as we walked along the level winding road through the still marshes.

'How much better, you mean!' he laughed. 'I know it. Bernard you'll hardly believe it, but I'm on the way to be a popular man!'

He had not lost his old knack of reading one's thoughts.

'Don't trouble yourself to find the polite answer to that,' he hastened to add. 'No-one knows as well as I how unpopular I was; and no-one knows so well why,' he added, in a very low voice. 'However,' he went on gaily, 'unpopularity is a thing of the past. The folk hereabout call on us, and condole with us on our hutch. A thing of the past, as I said – but what a past it was, eh! You're the only man who ever liked me. You don't know what that's been to me many a dark day and night. When the others were – you know – it was like a hand holding mine, to think of you. I've always thought I was sure of one soul in the world to stand by me.'

'Yes,' I said – 'yes.'

He flung his arm over my shoulder with a frank, boyish gesture of affection, quite foreign to his nature as I had known it.

'And I know why you didn't come to our wedding,' he went on; 'but that's all right now, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said again, for indeed it was. There are brown eyes in the world, after all, as well as blue, and one pair of brown that meant heaven to me as the blue had never done.

'That's well,' Hurst answered, and we walked on in satisfied silence, till we passed across the furze-crowned ridge, and went down the hill to Hurstcote. It lies in the hollow, ringed round by its moat, its dark red walls showing the sky behind them. There was no welcoming sparkle of early litten candle, only the pale amber of the September evening shining through the gaunt unglazed windows.

Three planks and a rough handrail had replaced the old draw-bridge. We passed across the moat, and Hurst pulled a knotted rope that hung beside the great iron-bound door. A bell clanged loudly inside. In the moment we spent there, waiting, Hurst pushed back a briar that was trailing across the arch, and let it fall outside the handrail.

'Nature is too much with us here,' he said, laughing. 'The clematis spends its time tripping one up, or clawing at one's hair, and we are always expecting the ivy to force itself through the window and make an uninvited third at our dinner-table.'

Then the great door of Hurstcote Castle swung back, and there stood Kate, a thousand times sweeter and more beautiful than ever. I looked at her with momentary terror and dazzlement. She was indeed much more beautiful than any woman with brown eyes could be. My heart almost stopped beating.

With life or death in the balance: Right!

To be beautiful is not the same thing as to be dear, thank God. I went forward and took her hand with a free heart.

It was a pleasant fortnight I spent with them. They had had one tower completely repaired, and in its queer eight-sided rooms we lived, when we were not out among the marshes, or by the blue sea at Pevensey.

Mrs Hurst had made the rooms quaintly charming by a medley of Liberty stuffs and Wardour Street furniture. The grassy space within the castle walls, with its underground passages, its crumbling heaps of masonry, overgrown with lush creepers, was better than any garden. There we met the fresh morning; there we lounged through lazy noons; there the grey evenings found us.

I have never seen any two married people so utterly, so undisguisedly in love as these were. I, the third, had no embarrassment in so being – for their love had in it a completeness, a childish abandonment, to which the presence of a third – a friend – was no burden. A happiness, reflected from theirs, shone on me. The days went by, dreamlike, and brought the eve of my return to London, and to the commonplaces of life.

We were sitting in the courtyard; Hurst had gone to the village to post some letters. A big moon was just showing over the battlements, when Mrs Hurst shivered.

'It's late,' she said, 'and cold; the summer is gone. Let us go in.' So we went in to the little warm room, where a wood fire flickered on a brick hearth, and a shaded lamp was already glowing softly. Here we sat on the cushioned seat in the open window, and looked out through the lozenge panes at the gold moon, and ah! the light of her making ghosts in the white mist that rose thick and heavy from the moat.

'I am so sorry you are going,' she said presently; 'but you will come and skate on the moat with us at Christmas, won't you? We mean to have a medieval Christmas. You don't know what that is? Neither do I; but John does. He is very, very wise.'

'Yes,' I answered, 'he used to know many things that most men don't even dream of as possible to know.'

She was silent a minute, and then shivered again. I picked up the shawl she had thrown down when we came in, and put it round her.

'Thank you! I think – don't you? – that there are some things one is not meant to know, and someone is meant *not* to know. You see the distinction?'

'I suppose so – yes.'

'Did it never frighten you in the old days,' she went on, 'to see that John would never – was always –'

'But he has given all that up now?'

'Oh yes, ever since our honeymoon. Do you know, he used to mesmerise me. It was horrible. And that book of his –'

'I didn't know you believed in Black Magic.'

'Oh, I don't – not the least bit. I never was at all superstitious, you know. But those things always frighten me just as much as if I believed in them. And besides – I think they are wicked; but John – Ah, there he is! Let's go and meet him.'

His dark figure was outlined against the sky behind the hill. She wrapped the soft shawl more closely around her, and we went out in the moonlight to meet her husband.

The next morning when I entered the room I found that it lacked its chief ornament. The sparkling white and silver breakfast accessories were there, but for the deft white hands and kindly welcoming blue eyes of my hostess I looked in vain. At ten minutes past nine Hurst came in looking horribly worried, and more like his old self than I had ever expected to see him.

'I say, old man,' he said hurriedly, 'are you really set on going back to town today – because Kate's awfully queer? I can't think what's wrong. I want you to see her after breakfast.'

I reflected a minute. 'I can stay if I send a wire,' I said.

'I wish you would, then,' Hurst said, wringing my hand and turning away; 'she's been off her head most of the night, talking the most astounding nonsense. You must see her after breakfast. Will you pour out the coffee?'

'I'll see her now, if you like,' I said, and he led me up the winding stair to the room at the top of the tower.

I found her quite sensible, but very feverish. I wrote a prescription, and rode Hurst's mare over to Eastbourne to get it made up. When I got back she was worse. It seemed to be a sort of aggravated marsh fever. I reproached myself with having let her sit by the open window the night before. But I remembered with some satisfaction that I had told Hurst that the place was not quite healthy. I only wished I had insisted on it more strongly.

For the first day or two I thought it was merely a touch of marsh fever, that would pass off with no more worse consequence than a little weakness; but on the third day I perceived that she would die.

Hurst met me as I came from her bedside, stood aside on the narrow landing for me to pass, and followed me down into the little sitting-room, which, deprived for three days of her presence, already bore the air of a room long deserted. He came in after me and shut the door.

'You're wrong,' he said abruptly, reading my thoughts as usual; 'she won't die – she can't die.'

'She will,' I bluntly answered, for I am no believer in that worst refinement of torture known as 'breaking bad news gently'. 'Send for any other man you choose. I'll consult with the whole College of Physicians if you like. But nothing short of a miracle can save her.'

'And you don't believe in miracles,' he answered quietly. 'I do, you see.'

'My dear old fellow, don't buoy yourself up with false hopes. I know my trade; I wish I could believe I didn't! Go back to her now; you have not very long to be together.'

I wrung his hand; he returned the pressure, but said almost cheerfully – 'You know your trade, old man, but there are some things you don't know. Mine, for instance – I mean my wife's constitution. Now I know that thoroughly. And you mark my words – she won't die. You might as well say *I* was not long for this world.'

'*You*,' I said with a touch of annoyance; 'you're good for another thirty or forty years.'

'Exactly so,' he rejoined quickly, 'and so is she. Her life's as good as mine, you'll see – she won't die.'

At dusk on the next day she died. He was with her; he had not left her since he had told me that she would not die. He was sitting by her holding her hand. She had been unconscious for some time, when suddenly she dragged her hand from his, raised herself in bed, and cried out in a tone of acutest anguish – 'John! John! Let me go! For Heaven's sake let me go!'

Then she fell back dead.

He would not understand – would not believe; he still sat by her, holding her hand, and calling on her by every name that love could teach him. I began to fear for his brain. He would not leave her, so by-and-by I brought him a cup of coffee in which I had mixed a strong opiate. In about an hour I went back and found him fast asleep with his face on the pillow close by the face of his dead wife. The gardener and I carried him down to my bedroom, and I sent for a woman from the village. He slept for twelve hours. When he awoke his first words were – 'She is not dead! I must go to her!'

I hoped that the sight of her – pale, and beautiful, and still – with the white asters about her, and her cold hands crossed on her breast, would convince him; but no. He looked at her and said – 'Bernard, you're no fool; you know as well as I do that this is not death. Why treat it so? It is some form of catalepsy. If she should awake and find herself like this the shock might destroy her reason.'

And, to the horror of the woman from the village, he flung the asters on to the floor, covered the body with blankets, and sent for hot-water bottles.

I was now quite convinced that his brain was affected, and I saw plainly enough that he would never consent to take the necessary steps for the funeral.

I began to wonder whether I had not better send for another doctor, for I felt that I did not care to try the opiate again on my own responsibility, and something must be done about the funeral.

I spent a day in considering the matter – a day passed by John Hurst beside his wife's body. Then I made up my mind to try all my powers to bring him to reason, and to this end I went once more into the chamber of death. I found Hurst talking wildly, in low whispers. He seemed to be talking to someone who was not there. He did not know me, and suffered himself to be led away. He was, in fact, in the first stage of brain fever. I actually blessed his illness, because it opened a way out of the dilemma in which I found myself. I wired for a trained nurse from town, and for the local undertaker. In a week she was buried, and John Hurst still lay unconscious and unheeding; but I did not look forward to his first renewal of consciousness.

Yet his first conscious words were not the inquiry I dreaded. He only asked whether he had been ill long, and what had been the matter. When I had told him, he just nodded and went off to sleep again.

A few evenings later I found him excited and feverish, but quite himself, mentally. I said as much to him in answer to a question which he put to me – 'There's no brain disturbance now? I'm not mad or anything?'

'No, no, my dear fellow. Everything is as it should be.'

'Then,' he answered slowly, 'I must get up and go to her.'

My worst fears were realised.

In moments of intense mental strain the truth sometimes overpowers all one's better resolves. It sounds brutal, horrible. I don't know what I meant to say; what I said was – 'You can't; she's buried.'

He sprang up in bed, and I caught him by the shoulders.

'Then it's true!' he cried, 'and I'm not mad. Oh, great God in heaven, let me go to her; let me go! It's true! It's true!'

I held him fast, and spoke. 'I am strong – you know that. You are weak and ill; you are quite in my power – we're old friends, and there's nothing I wouldn't do to serve you. Tell me what you mean; I will do anything you wish.' This I said to soothe him.

'Let me go to her,' he said again.

'Tell me all about it,' I repeated. 'You are too ill to go to her. I will go, if you can collect yourself and tell me why. You could not walk five yards.'

He looked at me doubtfully.

‘You’ll help me? You won’t say I’m mad, and have me shut up? You’ll help me?’

‘Yes, yes – I swear it!’ All the time I was wondering what I should do to keep him from his mad purpose.

He lay back on his pillows, white and ghastly; his thin features and sunken eyes showed hawklike above the rough growth of his four weeks’ beard. I took his hand. His pulse was rapid, and his lean fingers clenched themselves round mine.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘I don’t know – There aren’t any words to tell you how true it is. I am not mad, I am not wandering. I am as sane as you are. Now listen, and if you’ve a human heart in you, you’ll help me. When I married her I gave up hypnotism and all the old studies; she hated the whole business. But before I gave it up I hypnotised her, and when she was completely under my control I forbade her soul to leave its body till my time came to die.’

I breathed more freely. Now I understood why he had said, ‘She *cannot* die.’

‘My dear old man,’ I said gently, ‘dismiss these fancies, and face your grief boldly. You can’t control the great facts of life and death by hypnotism. She is dead; she is dead, and her body lies in its place. But her soul is with God who gave it.’

‘No!’ he cried, with such strength as the fever had left him. ‘No! no! Ever since I have been ill I have seen her, every day, every night, and always wringing her hands and moaning, “Let me go, John – let me go”.’

‘Those were her last words, indeed,’ I said; ‘it is natural that they should haunt you. See, you bade her soul not leave her body. It has left it, for she is dead.’

His answer came almost in a whisper, borne on the wings of a long breathless pause.

‘*She is dead, but her soul has not left her body.*’

I held his hand more closely, still debating what I should do.

‘She comes to me,’ he went on; ‘she comes to me continually. She does not reproach, but she implores, “Let me go, John – let me go!” And I have no more power now; I cannot let her go, I cannot reach her. I can do nothing, nothing. Ah!' he cried, with a sudden sharp change of voice that thrilled through me to the ends of my fingers and feet: 'Ah, Kate, my life, I will come to you! No, no, you shan't be left alone among the dead. I am coming, my sweet.'

He reached his arms out towards the door with a look of longing and love, so really, so patently addressed to a sentient presence, that I turned sharply to see if, in truth, perhaps – nothing, of course – nothing.

'She is dead,' I repeated stupidly. 'I was obliged to bury her.'

A shudder ran through him.

'I must go and see for myself,' he said.

Then I knew – all in a minute – what to do.

'I will go,' I said. 'I will open her coffin, and if she is not – is not as other dead folk, I will bring her body back to this house.'

'Will you go now?' he asked, with set lips.

It was nigh on midnight. I looked into his eyes.

'Yes, now,' I said; 'but you must swear to lie still till I return.'

'I swear it.' I saw I could trust him, and I went to wake the nurse. He called weakly after me, 'There's a lantern in the tool-shed – and, Bernard –'

'Yes, my poor old chap.'

'There's a screwdriver in the sideboard drawer.'

I think until he said that I really meant to go. I am not accustomed to lie, even to mad people, and I think I meant it till then.

He leaned on his elbow, and looked at me with wide-open eyes.

'Think,' he said, 'what she must feel. Out of the body, and yet tied to it, all alone among the dead. Oh, make haste, make haste; for if I am not mad, and I have really fettered her soul, there is but one way!'

'And that is?'

'I must die too. Her soul can leave her body when I die.'

I called the nurse, and left him. I went out, and across the wold to the church, but I did not go in. I carried the screwdriver and the lantern, lest he should send the nurse to see if I had taken them. I leaned on the churchyard wall, and thought of her. I had loved the woman, and I remembered it in that hour.

As soon as I dared I went back to him – remember I believed him mad – and told the lie that I thought would give him most ease.

'Well?' he said eagerly, as I entered.

I signed to the nurse to leave us.

'There is no hope,' I said. 'You will not see your wife again till you meet her in heaven.'

I laid down the screwdriver and the lantern, and sat down by him.

'You have seen her?'

'Yes.'

'And there's no doubt?'

'There is no doubt.'

'Then I *am* mad; but you're a good fellow, Bernard, and I'll never forget it in this world or the next.'

He seemed calmer, and fell asleep with my hand on his. His last word was a 'Thank you', that cut me like a knife.

When I went into his room next morning he was gone. But on his pillow a letter lay, painfully scrawled in pencil, and addressed to me.

'You lied. Perhaps you meant kindly. You didn't understand. She is not dead. She has been with me again. Though her soul may not leave her body, thank God it can still speak to mine. That vault – it is worse than a mere churchyard grave. Goodbye.'

I ran all the way to the church, and entered by the open door. The air was chill and dank after the crisp October sunlight. The stone that closed the vault of the Hursts of Hurstcote had been raised, and was lying beside the dark gaping hole in the chancel floor. The nurse, who had followed me, came in before I could shake off the horror that held me moveless. We both went down into the vault. Weak, exhausted by illness and sorrow, John Hurst had yet found strength to follow his love to the grave. I tell you he had crossed that wold alone, in the grey of the chill dawn; alone he had raised the stone and had gone down to her. He had opened her coffin, and he lay on the floor of the vault with his wife's body in his arms.

He had been dead some hours.

The brown eyes filled with tears when I told my wife this story.

'You were quite right, he was mad,' she said. 'Poor things! Poor lovers!'

But sometimes when I wake in the grey morning, and, between waking and sleeping, think of all those things that I must shut out from my sleeping and my waking thoughts, I wonder was I right or was he? Was he mad, or was I idiotically incredulous? For – and it is this thing that haunts me – when I found them dead together in the vault, she had been buried five weeks. But the body that lay in John Hurst's arms, among the mouldering coffins of the Hursts of Hurstcote, was perfect and beautiful as when first he clasped her in his arms, a bride.