



THE LIE

A Short Story, written for "The Listener"
By S. MORRISON JONES



HE was the most unpleasant little boy I have ever taught. He was sly and deceitful and mean. He was lazy and greedy and dirty. He was thoroughly unlikeable. Most young children are lovable and appealing, at times anyway. If there is nothing else, there is the soft contour of cheek and chin, that lovely line the back of the head makes with the neck, the straight little bodies and the candid gaze of the eyes—things which catch at the heart at unexpected moments, and twist it with pity for the glorious short-lived youth which almost before it is realised will turn to warped and ignoble age; for the wide-eyed innocence which will so soon give place to bitter knowledge.

Fred roused none of these feelings; he seemed born old; he was a tough and nasty little boy; stupid in things that matter, yet all unpleasant knowledge seemed to be his from birth; a bully and a nuisance.

He had only one parent living, his mother, in those days long ago when I taught him. I met her casually a few times; with her brother she worked a small farm in the district. I felt sorry for her; the thought came into my mind when I first met her, "The only son of his mother, and she a widow." And, I

thought, such a son! My sympathy, and that of others, was quite wasted. Fred's mother was blindly, passionately proud of him. Women, some women (I suspect most of us) have a tremendous capacity for self-deception; look round you at the men we are able to idolise, and you will grant the truth of that. Fred's mother had the quality to a marked degree. She simply did not question; she accepted all Fred's unlovely little person and, by some magic given more especially to women who are mothers, his faults did not bring her wisdom—or disillusionment.

IN my class there was also at that time a fine boy—Hugh—one of those people made for love and all good things; supremely vital and healthy, generous, frank, open, and intelligent. His mother was my friend, and when after a year or two I was transferred, I kept more or less in touch with her for years; those years that crept slowly, surely on to 1939; years when all over the world countless Freds and Hughs of every country played and quarrelled and grew and progressed slowly towards the fate that was to be theirs—the fate that all our love and thought and teaching could not keep from them. 1940-1941; and the casualty lists began to appear after Greece, after Crete, after Libya; and every now and then my eye came on the name of one of those boys I had taught through the years.

Thinking of the pity of it, the waste, and yet too what is perhaps the only compensation for it—"They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old; Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn."—I wrote down in the best way I could my thoughts—in a way an obituary for them, those fine little boys

I had seen grow out of childhood to the short adolescence that was all they were to have. The words I wanted, the fine, tender words, hovered like butterflies just out of reach, but still somehow I set down a faint image of the picture I saw. Out of that procession of hundreds of boys, grave or gay; eager or listless; boastful or humble; clever or dull; bright or dreamy, I wove the picture of one boy, splendid, fine, a boy of the type of all that is best in our youth; gallant, gentle, brave—your son or mine. And I called it "Your Son," and the editor of a country journal, a paper for farming men and women, accepted and printed it. I hoped it might bring a tiny measure of comfort to all mothers, but gradually as I wrote it I knew that my type, the boy I had evolved, was a true portrait of Hugh. Not one of the fine qualities but was his. And some time before it was published, Hugh's name was in the casualty list in black type—killed in action. Further down the list, though I did not even notice it at the time, was Fred's name, too.

I KNEW that to Hugh's mother the blow would be a heavy, a shocking one; it was almost impossible for me to imagine that boy—twenty is only a boy—so vital, so sparkling with life in my last sight of him—gone; gone utterly for all the rest of time. What would it be to his mother to have to face that knowledge? But I could not go to her at once, I had to wait until the end of the term; then I drove over the country roads towards her township. I took nothing with me—but my written tribute. That was rightly Hugh's, and while she might not have read it yet, would not know it for mine if she had, I liked to think that it would mean something to her; that it might help that I could say, "Read this; see what was thought of him—your son—see how truly he was loved, and honoured; see how even in his short twenty years he endeared himself, left a lovely memory, for me, and an inspiration for others."

MY way took me past the farm where Fred's mother lived. She was weeding, listlessly, by the front gate, and I stopped for a word with her. She looked old, tired, defeated, lost. Her eyes were sunken and red-rimmed. The hand she rested on the car door was limp and tired. I was shocked at the change from the cheery bustling little woman I remembered, and guessed at the reason before she spoke.

"Fred—?" I asked, and for the first of me I would not bring any real interest or any genuine concern into my voice.

"He's gone. Libya—killed in action; will you come in for a minute? I like to talk to anyone who used to know him, and I don't get out much—" And I could not refuse. I followed her down the broken concrete path between rows of gay flowers to the front door.

But when we were in the house, she did not say very much, only a few disconnected remarks as she made a cup of tea. But what she did say was all on the same lines—"If only people round here had appreciated Fred," she said once. And later, "If people here had only seen Fred the way I did—such a good boy, so generous"—she went into her bedroom at that and brought out an embroidered cushion cover; a cheap, flimsy thing; hardly worth a few pence, which she stroked with loving fingers. "He sent me this, only a little while before—I heard—; cost him ever so much, he said, and I told him he mustn't spend all his money on me, and sent him some, because he was short—" I stared at the piece of cloth, and even while I pretended to admire it, I was remembering the greedy, selfish boy I had known, never giving away one sweet from a full bag, and I knew he hadn't changed.

Then again, as we drank sweet strong tea, and ate bread and butter—and I was glad I had stayed, because it was plain she had eaten very little for some time.

"It would've helped somehow if people had understood Fred; if they hadn't been so down on him; I sort of felt they were, always. There's something I've been reading just lately, and somehow the boy in it—it's a sort of story, only not really a story, in the Journal, 'Your Son,' it's called, somehow the boy in it just reminded me of Fred."

I felt a glow of indignation; I could not help it. But I checked my exclamation in time; I remembered that Fred was dead; I remembered that this was his mother who was speaking to me, the tenderly reminiscent look on her face. And I marvelled; are all sons Hughs to the mothers that bear them?

I LEFT soon after that to go on to the house of my friend, Hugh's mother. I found her facing up to sorrow with the



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Women and the Home

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