

THIS IS THE END

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This is the end by Stella Benson

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STELLA BENSON

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BY

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THIS IS THE END

THIS is the end, for the moment, of all my thinking, this is my unfinal conclusion. There is no reason in tangible things, and no system in the ordinary ways of the world. Hands were made to grope, and feet to stumble, and the only things you may count on are the unaccountable things. System is a fairy and a dream, you never find system where or when you expect it. There are no reasons except reasons you and I don't know.

I should not be really surprised if the policeman across the way grew wings, or if the deep sea rose and washed out the chaos of the land. I should not raise my eyebrows if the daily press became the Little Sunbeam of the Home, or if Cabinet Ministers struck for a decrease of wages. I feel no security in facts, precedent seems no protection to me. The wisdom you can find in an Encyclopedia, or in Selfridge's Information Bureau, seems

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to me just a transitory adaptation to quicksand circumstances.

But if the things which I know in spite of my education were false, if the eyes of the sea forgot their secret, or if the accent of the steep woods became vulgar, if the fairy adventures that happen in my heart fell flat, if the good friends my eyes have never seen failed me,—then indeed should I know emptiness, and an astonishment that would kill.

I want to introduce you to Jay, a 'bus-conductor and an idealist. She is not the heroine, but the most constantly apparent woman in this book. I cannot introduce you to a heroine because I have never met one.

She was a person who took nothing in the world for granted, but as she had only a slight connection with the world, that is not saying very much. Her answer to everything was "Why?" The fundamental facts that you and I accept from our youth upwards, like *Be Good and You Will Be Happy*, or *Change Your Boots When You Come In Out Of The Wet*, or *Respect Your Elders*, or *Love Your Neighbour*, or *Never Cross Your Legs Above The Knee*, did not impress Jay.

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I never knew her as a baby, but I am sure she must have been born a propounder of questions, and a smiler at the answers she received. I daresay she used to ask questions—without result—long before she could talk, but I am quite sure she was not embittered by the lack of result. Nothing ever embittered Jay, not even her own pessimism. There is a finality about bitterness, and Jay was never final. Her last word was always on a questioning note. Her mind was always open, waiting for more. "Oh no," she would tell her pillow at night, "there must be a better answer than that . . ."

Perhaps it is hardly necessary to add that she had quarrelled with her Family, and run away from home. Her Family knew neither what she was doing nor where she was doing it. Families are incurably conceited, and this one supposed that, having broken away from it, Jay was going to the bad. On the contrary, she was a 'bus-conductor, but I only tell you this in confidence. I repeat the Family did not know it, and does not know it yet.

The Family sometimes said that Jay was an idealist, but it did not really think so.

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The Family sometimes said that she was rather mad, but it did not know how mad she was, or it would have sent her away to live in a doctor's establishment at Margate. It never realised that it had only come in contact with about one-fifth of its young relation, and that the other four-fifths were shut away from it. Shut away in a shining bubble world with only room in it for one—for One, and a shining bubble Story.

I do not know how universal an experience a Secret Story and a Secret Friend may be. Perhaps this wonder is a commonplace to you, only you are more reticent about it than Jay or I. But to me, even after twenty years' intimacy with what I can only describe as a supplementary life that I cannot describe, it still seems so very wonderful that I cannot believe I share it with every man and woman in the street.

The great advantage of a Secret Story over other stories is that you cannot put it into print. So I can only show you the initial letter, and you may if you choose look upon it as an imaginary hieroglyphic. Or you may not.

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Just this, that a bubble world can contain a round and russet horizon of high woods which you can attain, and from the horizon a long view of an unending sea. You can run down across the dappled fields, you can run down into the cove and stroke the sea and hear the intimate minor singing of it. And when you feel as strong as the morning, you can shout and run against the wind, against the flying sand that never blows above your knees. And when you feel as tired as the night, you can climb slowly up the cliff path and go into the House, the House you know much better than any house your ordinary eyes have seen, and there you will find your Secret Friends. The best part about Secret Friends is that they will never weary you by knowing you. You share their House, your passing hand helps to polish the base of that wooden figure that ends the banisters, you know the childish delight of that wide short chimney in the big turret room, a chimney so wide and so short that you can stand inside the great crooked fireplace and whisper to the birds that look down from the edge of the chimney only a yard or two above you. You