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# The Splendid Lie

By S. B. H. HURST

*A brief story of the World War, and two old men who sought to comfort grieving humanity*

**A** QUIET night in a valley of the Cotswold Hills in England, in December, 1917. A night like a Christmas card. Stars, snow on the ground and an old brick house that had seen a hundred thousand nights.

In the library of the house two elderly men sat at a desk. One was a famous classical scholar, professor in a university, the other, the owner of the house, Lord Daywater, a member of the War Cabinet.

"The guns in Flanders seem very far from this peaceful place," said the professor. "It's good to know that your boy will be home on leave in a few days!"

Lord Daywater smiled. Then he said, somewhat dryly, "Yes! And that reminds me! Two old fools—you and I—had better attend to a small matter of signing our names to a certain document! My boy insists upon it, and you can't blame him. Shall we do it now?"

The professor smiled.

"We have been a couple of fools," he answered. "To be brutally frank, we have been a couple of liars. We meant well, of course, but, all the same—liars! It did not matter so much about me. My folly did not seem so far out of place. I am only a university professor. But you! Only your unusual ability saved you from being asked to resign from the government. The opposition papers even said you ought to. I remember certain remarks about 'a ghost-hunter is hardly a man to expect sensible work from, especially in time of war!' . . . Yes, get out that document, and let's sign it!"

Lord Daywater opened a drawer and took out a typewritten document.

"It's only fair to the boy," he said. "You can't blame him for wishing to have proof of his father's sanity. He will have children some day. So he begged us to sign this. This admission that we lied to bring comfort to broken hearts! It will not be published until after we are dead. But, Dick, we did mean well. Couple of liars, but we have given comfort to thousands. Because all men crave knowledge of life beyond the grave—if there is any. You and I do not believe there is. It's just a harmless superstition. Yet all the world thinks we are ardent spiritualists, and thousands of poor women, wives, mothers and sweethearts have taken comfort because we have appeared in public and said that we *know* men live after death, *because we have proof of spirit communication!* Don't blame my level-headed boy for asking us to sign this admission. After our deaths he will publish it, in the interest of truth, in an effort to curb the superstition we have publicly endorsed. We were fools, and liars, too, but we have brought happiness to thousands! And I don't regret having lied. If I have helped to dry a tear I am rewarded!"

The professor nodded.

"Your boy was always such a logical little chap. Playful always, but sternly matter of fact under the playfulness—even when quite a little chap and I used to carry him around on my back. Do you remember how he loved to climb up to

the high window there—and knock on the pane and grin at us when we were in here playing chess? That window over there. . . . Great Scott!”

Tapping on the pane and smiling at the two old men was a young man in a torn and muddy uniform.

“He startled me,” shouted the professor.

“He always loved to startle us!” the father shouted joyfully.

They rushed to the library door, into the hall, to the front door of the house. Lord Daywater flung it open, shouting.

“He must have got earlier leave than he expected. And he wanted to surprize us as he did when he was little—tapping on the window! Bet you a quid he is hiding from us, in his old way!”

He shouted into the night.

“Bob! Bob! Come in, you young rascal!”

The light wind of a winter night murmured over the snow.

“Come on!” shouted Daywater joyfully to the professor. “We’ll catch him and roll him in the snow as we used to do! The young tease. You run around the house that way, and I will run this—just as we used to do! Playful young rascal, but we two old men will catch him and roll him in the snow!”

The professor ran one way, Daywater panted the other. They met at the back of the house.

“Did you see him?” shouted the father. “No!” puffed the classical scholar. “He dodged us, as he always did! Bet he’s sitting in the library laughing at us. Come on back, Day!”

The two old men plowed through the snow, back to the front door. They heard the telephone in the library ringing violently.

“Damn that phone!” panted Daywater as they rushed in. “But where’s the boy?”

“Hiding some place,” laughed the professor. “Answer that phone, old man.”

Lord Daywater lifted the receiver.

“Yes!” he said. “Oh, a telegram for me. Yes, read it!”

He turned to the professor.

“A wire for me down at the village. I told the operator to read it to me. While he is doing it—it may be important, you know—go and find that boy of mine, will you? Tell him he’ll get spanked for playing tricks on two staid and distinguished gentlemen!”

The operator in the village began to read the message. Lord Daywater listened.

“We regret to report that your son, Captain the Honorable Robert Daywater, was killed in action three days ago. We would have advised you earlier, but the heavy bombardment made communication difficult. The war council extends its sympathy.”

