

*What madness it is to be man
and to seek the truth!*



This allegorical story was written by Leonid Nikolayevich Andreyev in 1904,¹ under the title “You Lie.” This translation, by W.H. Lowe, was first included in *Silence and Other Stories*, London: Francis Griffith, 1910. It was republished in *The Little Angel and Other Stories*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916; and in *World’s Great Romances*. New York: Black’s Readers Service Co., 1929; pp. 147-53.

Frontispiece: The Truth, by Russian Artist Natsuki.

Part 1

“You lie! I know you lie!”

“What are you shouting for? Is it necessary that everyone should hear us?”

And here again she lied, for I had not shouted, but spoken in the quietest voice, holding her hand and speaking quite gently while that venomous word “lie” hissed like a little serpent.

“I love you,” she continued, “and you ought to believe me. Does not this convince you?”

And she kissed me. But when I was about to take hold of her hand and press it — she was already gone. She left the semi-dark corridor, and I followed her once more to the place where a gay party was just coming to an end. How did I know where it was? She had told me that I might go there, and I went there and watched the dancing all the night through. No one came near me, or spoke to me, I was a stranger to all, and sat in the corner near the band. Pointed straight at me was the mouth of a great brass instrument, through which some one hidden in the depths of it kept bel-lowing, and every minute or so would give a rude staccato laugh: “Ho! ho! ho!”

From time to time a scented white cloud would come close to me. It was she. I knew not how she managed to caress me without being observed, but for one short little second her shoulder would press mine, and for one short little second I would lower my eyes and see a white neck in the opening of a white dress. And when I raised my eyes I saw a profile as white, severe, and truthful as that of a pensive angel on the tomb of the long-forgotten dead. And I saw her eyes. They were large, greedy of the light, beautiful and calm. From their blue-white setting the pupils shone black, and the more I looked at them the blacker they seemed, and the more unfathomable their depths. Maybe I looked at them for so short a time that my heart failed to make the slightest impression, but certainly never did I understand so profoundly and terribly the meaning of Infinity, nor ever realised it with such force. I felt in fear and pain

¹ See Andreyev’s portrait by Ilya Yefimovich Repin, also painted in 1904, shown herein on page 10.

that my very life was passing out in a slender ray into her eyes, until I became a stranger to myself — desolated, speechless, almost dead. Then she would leave me, taking my life with her, and dance again with a certain tall, haughty, but handsome partner of hers. I studied his every characteristic — the shape of his shoes, the width of his rather high shoulders, the rhythmic sway of one of his locks, which separated itself from the rest, while with his indifferent, unseeing glance he, as it were, crushed me against the wall, and I felt myself as flat and lifeless to look at as the wall itself.

When they began to extinguish the lights, I went up to her and said:

“It is time to go. I will accompany you.”

But she expressed surprise.

“But certainly I am going with him,” and she pointed to the tall, handsome man, who was not looking at us. She led me out into an empty room and kissed me.

“You lie,” I said very softly.

“We shall meet again to-morrow. You must come,” was her answer.

When I drove home, the green frosty dawn was looking out from behind the high roofs. In the whole street there were only we two, the sledge-driver and I. He sat with bent head and wrapped-up face, and I sat behind him wrapped up to the very eyes. The sledge-driver had his thoughts, and I had mine, and there behind the thick walls thousands of people were sleeping, and they had their own dreams and thoughts. I thought of her, and of how she lied. I thought of death, and it seemed to me that those dimly-lightened walls had already looked upon my death, and that was why they were so cold and upright. I know not what the thoughts of the sledge-driver may have been, neither do I know of what those hidden by the walls were dreaming. But then, neither did they know my thoughts and reveries.

And so we drove on through the long and straight streets, and the dawn rose from behind the roofs, and all around was motionless and white. A cold scented cloud came close to me, and straight into my ear someone unseen laughed:

“Ho! ho! ho!”



Part 2

She had lied. She did not come, and I waited for her in vain. The grey, uniform, frozen semi-darkness descended from the lightless sky, and I was not conscious of when the twilight passed into evening, and when the evening passed into night — to me it was all one long night. I kept walking backwards and forwards with the same even, measured steps of hope deferred. I did not come close up to the tall house, where my beloved dwelt, nor to its glazed door which shone yellow at the end of the iron covered way, but I walked on the opposite side of the street with the same measured strides — backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. In going forward I did not take my eye off the glazed door, and when I turned back I stopped frequently and turned my head round, and then the snow pricked my face with its sharp needles. And so long were those sharp cold needles that they penetrated to my very heart, and pierced it with grief and anger at my useless waiting. The cold wind blew uninterruptedly from the bright north to the dark south, and whistled playfully on the icy roofs, and rebounding cut my face with sharp little snowflakes, and softly tapped the glasses of the empty lanterns, in which the lonely yellow flame, shivering with cold, bent to the draught. And I felt sorry for the lonely flame which lived only by night, and I thought to myself, when I go away all life will end in this street, and only the snowflakes will fly through the empty space; but still the yellow flame will continue to shiver and bend in loneliness and cold.

I waited for her, but she came not. And it seemed to me that the lonely flame and I were like one another, only that my lamp was not empty, for in that void, which I kept measuring with my strides, there did sometimes appear people. They grew up unheard behind my back, big and dark; they passed me, and like ghosts suddenly disappeared round the corner of the white building. Then again they would come out from round the corner, come up alongside of me and then gradually melt away in the great distance, obscured by the silently falling snow. Muffled up, formless, silent, they were so like to one another and to myself that it seemed as if scores of people were walking backwards and forwards and waiting, as I was, shivering and silent, and were thinking their own enigmatic sad thoughts.

I waited for her, but she came not. I know not why I did not cry out and weep for pain. I know not why I laughed and was glad, and crooked my fingers like claws, as though I held in them that little venomous thing which kept hissing like a snake: a lie! It wriggled in my hands, and bit my heart, and my head reeled with its poison. Everything was a lie! The boundary line between the future and the present, the present and the past, vanished. The boundary line between the time when I did not yet exist, and the time when I began to be, vanished, and I thought that I must have always been alive, or else never have lived at all. And always, before I lived and when I began to live, she had ruled over me, and I felt it strange that she should have a name and a body, and that her existence should have a beginning and an end. She had no name, she was always the one that lies, that makes eternally to wait, and never comes. And I knew not why, but I laughed, and the sharp needles pierced my heart, and right into my ear someone unseen laughed:

“Ho! ho! ho!”

Opening my eyes I looked at the lighted windows of the lofty house, and they quietly said to me in their blue and red language:

“Thou art deceived by her. At this very moment whilst thou art wandering, waiting, and suffering, she, all bright, lovely, and treacherous, is there, listening to the whispers of that tall, handsome man, who despises thee. If thou wert to break in there and kill her, thou wouldst be doing a good deed, for thou wouldst slay a lie.”

I gripped the knife I held in my hand tighter, and answered laughingly: “Yes, I will kill her.”

But the windows gazed at me mournfully, and added sadly: “Thou wilt never kill her. Never! because the weapon thou holdest in thy hand is as much a lie as are her kisses.”

The silent shadows of my fellow-watchers had disappeared long ago, and I was left alone in the cold void, I — and the lonely tongues of fire shivering with cold and despair. The clock in the neighbouring church-tower began to strike, and its dismal metallic sound trembled and wept, flying away into the void, and being lost in the maze of silently whirling snowflakes. I began to count the strokes, and went into a fit of laughter. The clock struck 15! The belfry was old, and so, too, was the clock, and although it indicated the right time, it struck spasmodically, sometimes so often that the grey, ancient bell-ringer had to clamber up and stop the convulsive strokes of the hammer with his hand. For whom did those senilely tremulous, melancholy sounds, which were embraced and throttled by the frosty darkness, tell a lie? So pitiable and inept was that useless lie.

With the last lying sounds of the clock the glazed door slammed, and a tall man made his way down the steps.

I saw only his back, but I recognized it as I had seen it only last evening, proud and contemptuous. I recognized his walk, and it was lighter and more confident than in the evening:

thus had I often left that door. He walked, as those do, whom the lying lips of a woman have just kissed.



Part 3

I threatened and entreated, grinding my teeth:

“Tell me the truth!”

But with a face cold as snow, while from beneath her brows, lifted in surprise, her dark, inscrutable eyes shone passionless and mysterious as ever, she assured me:

“But I am not lying to you.”

She knew that I could not prove her lie, and that all my heavy massive structure of torturing thought would crumble at one word from her, even one lying word. I waited for it — and it came forth from her lips, sparkling on the surface with the colours of truth, but dark in its innermost depths:

“I love thee! Am not I all thine?”

We were far from the town, and the snowclad plain looked in at the dark windows. Upon it was darkness, and around it was darkness, gross, motionless, silent, but the plain shone with its own latent coruscation, like the face of a corpse in the dark. In the over-heated room only one candle was burning, and on its reddening flame there appeared the white reflection of the deathlike plain.

“However sad the truth may be, I want to know it. Maybe I shall die when I know it, but death rather than ignorance of the truth. In your kisses and embraces I feel a lie. In your eyes I see it. Tell me the truth and I will leave you forever,” said I.

But she was silent. Her coldly searching look penetrated my inmost depths, and drawing out my soul, regarded it with strange curiosity.

And I cried: “Answer, or I will kill you!”

“Yes, do!” she quietly replied; “sometimes life is so wearisome. But the truth is not to be extracted by threat.”

And then I knelt to her. Claspng her hand I wept, and prayed for pity and the truth.

“Poor fellow!” said she, putting her hand on my head, “poor fellow!”

“Pity me,” I prayed, “I want so much to know the truth.”

And as I looked at her pure forehead, I thought that truth must be there behind that slender barrier. And I madly wished to smash the skull to get at the truth. There, too, behind a white bosom beat a heart, and I madly wished to tear her bosom with my nails, to see but for once an unveiled human heart. And the pointed, motionless flames of the expiring candle burnt yellow — and the walls grew dark and seemed farther apart — and it felt so sad, so lonely, so eery.

“Poor fellow!” she said. “Poor fellow!”

And the yellow flame of the candle shivered spasmodically, burnt low, and became blue.

Then it went out — and darkness enveloped us. I could not see her face, nor her eyes, for her arms embraced my head — and I no longer felt the lie. Closing my eyes,

I neither thought nor lived, but only absorbed the touch of her hands, and it seemed to me true. And in the darkness she whispered in a strangely fearsome voice:

“Put your arms round me — I’m afraid.”

Again there was silence, and again the gentle whisper fraught with fear!

“You desire the truth — but do I know it myself? And oh! don’t I wish I did? Take care of me; oh! I’m so frightened!”

I opened my eyes. The paling darkness of the room fled in fear from the lofty windows, and gathering near the walls hid itself in the corners. But through the windows there silently looked in a something huge, deadly-white. It seemed as though some one’s dead eyes were searching for us, and enveloping us in their icy gaze. Presently we pressed close together, while she whispered:

“Oh! I am so frightened!”



Part 4

I killed her. I killed her, and when she lay a flat, lifeless heap by the window, beyond which shone the dead-white plain, I put my foot on her corpse, and burst into a fit of laughter. It was not the laugh of a madman; oh, no! I laughed because my bosom heaved lightly and evenly, and within it all was cheerful, peaceful, and void, and because from my heart had fallen the worm which had been gnawing it. And bending down I looked into her dead eyes. Great, greedy of the light, they remained open, and were like the eyes of a wax doll — so round and dull were they, as though covered with mica. I was able to touch them with my fingers, open and shut them, and I was not afraid, because in those black, inscrutable pupils there lived no longer that demon of lying and doubt, which so long, so greedily, had sucked my blood.

When they arrested me I laughed. And this seemed terrible and wild to those who seized me. Some of them turned away from me in disgust, and went aside; others advanced threateningly straight towards me, with condemnation on their lips, but when my bright, cheerful glance met their eyes, their faces blanched, and their feet became rooted to the ground.

“Mad!” they said, and it seemed to me that they found comfort in the word, because it helped to solve the enigma of how I could love and yet kill the beloved — and laugh. One of them only, a man of full habit and sanguine temperament, called me by another name, which I felt as a blow, and which extinguished the light in my eyes.

“Poor man!” said he in compassion, although devoid of anger — for he was stout and cheerful. “Poor fellow!”

“Don’t!” cried I. “Don’t call me that!”

I know not why I threw myself upon him. Indeed, I had no desire to kill him, or even to touch him; but all these cowed people who looked on me as a madman and a villain, were all the more frightened, and cried out so that it seemed to me again quite ludicrous.

When they were leading me out of the room where the corpse lay, I repeated loudly and persistently, looking at the stout, cheerful man:

“I am happy, happy!”

And that was the truth.

Part 5

Once, when I was a child, I saw in a menagerie a panther, which struck my imagination and for long held my thoughts captive. It was not like the other wild beasts, which dozed without thought or angrily gazed at the visitors. It walked from corner to corner, in one and the same line, with mathematical precision, each time turning on exactly the same spot, each time grazing with its tawny side one and the same metal bar of the cage. Its sharp, ravenous head was bent down, and its eyes looked straight before it, never once turning aside. For whole days a noisily chattering crowd trooped before its cage, but it kept up its tramp, and never once turned an eye on the spectators. A few of the crowd laughed, but the majority looked seriously, even sadly, at that living picture of heavy, hopeless brooding, and went away with a sigh. And as they retired, they cast once more round at her a doubting, inquiring glance and sighed — as though there was something in common between their own lot, free as they were, and that of the unhappy, eager wild beast. And when later on I was grown up, and people, or books, spoke to me of eternity, I called to mind the panther, and it seemed to me that I knew eternity and its pains.

Such a panther did I become in my stone cage. I walked and thought. I walked in one line right across my cage from corner to corner, and along one short line travelled my thoughts, so heavy that it seemed that my shoulders carried not a head, but a whole world. But it consisted of but one word, but what an immense, what a torturing, what an ominous word it was.

“Lie!” that was the word.

Once more it crept forth hissing from all the corners, and twined itself about my soul; but it had ceased to be a little snake, it had developed into a great, glittering, fierce serpent. It bit me, and stifled me in its iron coils, and when I began to cry out with pain, as though my whole bosom were swarming with reptiles, I could only utter that abominable, hissing, serpent-like sound: “Lie!”

And as I walked, and thought, the grey level asphalt of the floor changed before my eyes into a grey, transparent abyss. My feet ceased to feel the touch of the floor, and I seemed to be soaring at a limitless height above the fog and mist. And when my bosom gave forth its hissing groan, thence — from below — from under that rarifying, but still impenetrable shroud, there slowly issued a terrible echo. So slow and dull was it, as though it were passing through a thousand years. And every now and then, as the fog lifted, the sound became less loud, and I understood that there — below — it was still whistling like a wind, that tears down the trees, while it reached my ears in a short, ominous whisper:

“Lie!”

This mean whisper worked me up into a rage, and I stamped on the floor and cried:

“There is no lie! I killed the lie.”

Then I purposely turned aside, for I knew what it would reply. And it did reply slowly from the depths of the bottomless abyss:

“Lie!”

The fact is, as you perceive, that I had made a grievous mistake. I had killed the woman, but made the lie immortal. Kill not a woman till you have, by prayer, by fire, and torture, torn from her soul the truth!

So thought I, and continued my endless tramp from corner to corner of the cell.



Part 6

Dark and terrible is the place to which she carried the truth, and the lie — and I am going thither. At the very throne of Satan I shall overtake her, and falling on my knees will weep; and cry:

“Tell me the truth!”

But God! This is also a lie. There, there is darkness, there is the void of ages and of infinity, and there she is not — she is nowhere. But the lie remains, it is immortal. I feel it in every atom of the air, and when I breathe, it enters my bosom with a hissing, and then rends it — yes, rends!

Oh! what madness it is — to be man and to seek the truth! What pain!

Help! Help!

