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## Author longed for her home in Halstead.

On this most romantic of weeks, one modest date will slip past without attention.

On February 20th, just over 80 years ago, Edith Nesbit married her second husband, Thomas Tucker. Her first marriage had been long and challenging; this was her late chance for love.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of E. Nesbit, acclaimed writer of many classic children's novels. We like to claim E. Nesbit as a local author, although in fact she lived in the Sevenoaks area for a relatively short part of her life. Her three years in Halstead were, however, one of the happiest periods of her life - which was difficult and often lonely.

One of her most successful books, "The Railway Children", was famously inspired by Knockholt Station in Halstead. The familiar scene where the children brave the railway tunnel to rescue a schoolboy with a broken leg, was based on the long tunnel still used by trains today.

It is hard to see the end of the tunnel without imagining Roberta, Peter and Phyllis waving a red flannel petticoat on a stick, as they memorably did in the book.

Edith's stay in Halstead was one she looked back on with affection. Reminiscing on her nomadic childhood, she wrote, *"Since I must needs choose one out of many remembrances, I choose my Kentish home, dearer to me than all. After many wanderings my mother took a house at Halstead. The Hall it was called, but the house itself did not lend itself to the pretensions of its name. A long, low red-brick house, that might have been commonplace but for the roses and the ivy which clung to the front of it, and the rich, heavy jasmine which covered the side.... From a laburnum tree in a corner of the lawn, we children slung an improvised hammock, and there I used to read and dream, and watch the swaying green gold of leaf and blossom."*

The only disturbing element in this idyllic life was the periodic intrusion of their landlady's "eccentric" son. Convinced that he was the rightful occupant of the house, he would turn up every six months or so clutching a carpet bag and demanding immediate possession. He was always persuaded to leave, and Edith learned he was not quite the danger he appeared.

*"Once he was in the drawing room being persuaded by my mother, I peeped into the carpet bag he had left in the hall. It contained three empty bottles that had held mixed pickles, a loaf of bread and a barrister's wig and gown".*

Edith's life had been peripatetic since the death of her father when she was three. The youngest of five children, Edith was sent to a series of schools and tutors in Brighton, Buckinghamshire, France, Spain and Germany. She hated most of these, and yearned for summer holidays with her brothers.

It was while she was living at Halstead Hall that she had her first writing success. Aged 15, she showed her poems to her mother, who sent them to the editor of Good Words and the Sunday Magazine. They were accepted and published, and earned Edith a guinea, to her delight.

Her dream was to become a poet, but the years after Halstead forced her down a different path. At 19 she married a journalist called Hubert Bland. They were both Socialists and founding members of the Fabian Society. Edith was seven months pregnant when they married, but found herself living alone.

Hubert, a philanderer who believed in open marriage, managed to live with his mother for some time after the wedding. Worse, five years later he moved his mistress, Alice Hoatson, into the household. This liaison produced two children. Edith accepted the situation and raised Alice's children along with her own three.

But money was tight; Hubert was not good at earning a living. Edith was forced to give up her dream of being a poet and turned to writing for children. This was lucrative enough to support her brood of five.

It is an irony that many of our most loved children's writers were not notably enthusiastic about small people. Noel Streatfield's biography of E Nesbit claimed that Edith did not particularly like children, and Edith's accounts of her own childhood suggest a dislike of the state of being a child. Perhaps this is what allowed her to depict the lives of the young with such clarity and lack of sentiment.

She wrote later, *"When I was a little child I used to pray fervently, tearfully, that when I should be grown up I might never forget when I thought and felt and suffered then."*

One of those events traumatised her far into adulthood. Living in Bordeaux, she begged to be taken to see a collection of mummies housed under a church. Expecting them to be arranged as clinically as those in the British Museum, she was horrified to find herself in a dingy chamber surrounded by hundreds of skeletons which still retained skin and hair. The experience left her with a profound fear of the dark, a terror she conquered only when she had her own children.

Hubert Bland died in 1914, and three years later she married Thomas "Skipper" Tucker, an engineer on the Woolwich Ferry. Her family and friends disapproved of Thomas's lower-class background, but he seems to have been a kind man with whom she was happy in the few years remaining to her.

A heavy smoker, she died of lung cancer in 1924, and is buried in the churchyard of St. Mary in the Marsh, New Romney, Kent. Presumably there is only one county where E Nesbit would have chosen to be buried. She wrote, *"My book of memory lies open always at the page where are the pictures of Kentish cherry orchards, field and farm and gold dim woodlands starred with primroses, light copses where the bluebells and wind flowers grow."*