

*Optional slide: This story takes place in 1917 in a village in England called Cottingley, and in London.*

### 1. Tableau

*At a hotel in London. Saturday, 25 August 1917. 7.45 p.m.  
FRANCES stands on a raised platform, surrounded by picture frames.*

FRANCES. We were playing. Down by the beck as usual when we heard voices. Singing. They weren't like human voices, more like the tinkling of bells. I thought it must be the wind or some of our friends playing a trick. But then we looked at the rushing stream, and there sitting on a rock was a fairy. We spoke to her, but she didn't reply. She waved her hand like to make us follow. And then... there they were. A little cluster of fairies, laughing and beckoning us. They made daisy chains and posies of harebells and laced campions and cowslips through our hair. We joined them in a dance. My cousin Elsie left me playing with them while she ran home to get her father's camera. When she came back, she took the first photo. She showed me how to use the camera, and then I took this one of her. She returned a few days later and took this one of the gnome. And then this one of the leaping fairy. And finally, this one of the fairies bathing in light.

SIR ARTHUR. Thank you, Frances. And now, ladies and gentlemen, I open the floor to your questions.

### 2. Before the Camera

*Optional slide: April 1917.*

*The scene takes place in several locations across Cottingley.*

*At a church. REVEREND and MRS COOPER are preparing for service. VIVIE bounds in.*

VIVIE. Reverend! Mrs Cooper!

REVEREND COOPER. Vivian, how are you?

VIVIE. I am WELL. And yourselves? How are your flock?

REVEREND COOPER. Oh! Well – haha! They're –

MRS COOPER (*sweetly*). Redeemable.

VIVIE. Well, you know what they say. A girl is raised by her village!

*They all laugh. VIVIE quickly continues.*

I have come here today to ask you just the teeniest tiniest little favour. Today is Elsie Wright's birthday.

REVEREND COOPER. Elsie Wright? Is she the one with brown hair?

VIVIE. Indeed she IS. What a great memory you have. Because it's Elsie's birthday and with all the sadness in the world, I was hoping we could bring a little bit of light to these dark times by baking Elsie a wonderful birthday cake.

MRS COOPER. What a nice thought, dear. Have you enough ingredients? Things are becoming scarce, you know.

VIVIE. That's just it. We have been scrimping and saving ingredients and we are nearly there, but you know what really makes a birthday cake a birthday cake? CANDLES. They're our way of showing our love to God, our love to the universe, and, God willing, our love to Elsie Wright.

REVEREND COOPER *withdraws one candle from a little bundle in his hands and begins to extend it to VIVIE.*

REVEREND COOPER. I'm sure one candle would be –  
VIVIE (*quickly*). Seventeen? For seventeen years.

REVEREND and MRS COOPER *look at each other*.  
REVEREND COOPER *hands VIVIE the whole bundle of candles*.

Thank you! Praise be to God.

*At a bakery. MAGS enters. Her voice is cheerful and pleasant but her face unsmiling and extremely matter-of-fact.*

MAGS. Hello, Mr Wyedale. I need some ingredients to bake a special cake.

MR WYEDALE. Well, Mags, you know we have a perfectly delicious selection of cakes in the bakery.

MAGS. No. This is a very specific type of cake. It's for Elsie Wright's birthday.

MR WYEDALE. Elsie Wright? I know. The one with the dreamy sort of yonderly face. I always make the mistake of looking where she's looking only she's not looking at anything.

MAGS. Yes, that is correct. May I have the ingredients, please?

MR WYEDALE. Well, er... do you have any money?

MAGS. No, I don't, but remember last week when I alphabetised your flour and yeast collections so you could bake your cakes very well? So I thought money wouldn't be important to you. I need equal parts flour, sugar, and butter, two eggs and a cherry.

MR WYEDALE. Why don't you go in the back and help yourself. Just let me know what you've taken afterwards.

*MAGS is already heading towards the store room.*

MAGS. Thank you, Mr Wyedale.

*At a shop. FLOSSIE in a state of agitation, speaking to MRS PEABODY, lightning-fast.*

FLOSSIE. Arrrgh, I'm all in a flap. Right, I need some it's Elsie's birthday and my list my my list I need a card and er and some wrapping paper but the card – Elsie is SO particular about cards – oh dear, everyone is counting on me and if I get it wrong –

MRS PEABODY. It's all right, Flossie dear. Calm down. Just take it one step at a time, and tell me what you need.

*At a farm. BOB and JANET are rooted firmly to the ground, arms crossed, surveying stacks of hay bales.*

BOB. Hello, Janet.

JANET. Hello, Bob. You know last year when our farm gave your farm some extra hay?

Well it's Elsie Wright's birthday today, and we were needing some ham trimmings for sandwiches.

BOB. Oh aye. Which one's Elsie Wright?

JANET. Arthur Wright's daughter. (*Off his blank look.*) Down the lane, turn right, cross the ford, up the hill, last house on the left. A favour's a favour, Bob.

BOB (*grudgingly*). Favour's a favour.

*At BETSY'S house. BETSY'S MUM is whisking in a bowl. BETSY approaches quietly.*

BETSY. Mum... you know Elsie? Well, it's her birthday and everyone's trying to gather ingredients.

BETSY'S MUM. Oh, Betsy, you know your aunt is coming from Bradford tomorrow.

BETSY. I know, Mum, but I was wondering if we had... an egg? Just one?

It's just Elsie gave me her Eccles cake last month when I sprained my ankle.

BETSY'S MUM. It means a lot to you?

BETSY. Yes.

BETSY'S MUM *gives her an egg*. BETSY *smiles*.

Thanks, Mum.

*She kisses her.*

*On the village common.*

MR BROWN. Agatha?

AGATHA. Mr Brown! I have a particular predicament, Mr Brown. Mr Brown, you know Elsie Wright, don't you? Lovely girl, surprised everyone last month by putting her entire fist in her mouth. Well, me and the girls want to bake her a birthday cake, and I've lost my chocolate bar. It's just gone! So I was wondering if I could borrow a bit of yours?

*She has already wrestled the chocolate out of his hands. She rushes off.*

*On the high street. The girls are all in a cluster and they have zeroed in on an elderly man.*

VIVIE. Mr Tindall!

MR TINDALL. Hello, Vivie, Flossie... And who's this? I've not seen her before.

MAGS. This is Elsie's cousin, Frances. She's here from South Africa.

MR TINDALL. Well I never. South Africa! What brings you to Cottingley, lass?

FRANCES. My father's at war, and my mother wanted to be nearer to Auntie Polly.