VINTAGE **BENNETT**

The Old Wives' Tale

CONTENTS

BOOK FOUR: WHAT LIFE IS

About the Book

You might find it hard to imagine that those stout ageing spinsters living quietly in small English towns ever led lives of passion or hardship, that they ever possessed beauty or romantic ideals. In *The Old Wives' Tale*, Arnold Bennett tells the story of two such old wives, sisters Constance and Sophia, from youth, through marriage, heartbreak, triumphs and disasters, to old age. In doing so, he reveals with careful compassion the intense inner lives that throb beneath every seemingly insignificant exterior.

About the Author

Arnold Bennett was born in Staffordshire on 27 May 1867, the son of a solicitor. Rather than following his father into the law, Bennett moved to London at the age of twenty-one and began a career in writing. His first novel, *A Man from the North*, was published in 1898 during a spell as editor of a periodical – throughout his life journalism supplemented his writing career. In 1903 Bennett moved to Paris, married, and published some of his best known novels, most of which were set in the Potteries district where he grew up: *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902), *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), and the *Clayhanger* series (1910–18). These works, as well as several successful plays, established him both in Europe and America as one of the most popular and acclaimed writers of his era. Bennett returned to England in 1912, and during the First World War worked for Lord Beaverbrook in the Ministry of Information. In 1921, separated from his first wife, he fell in love with an actress, Dorothy Cheston, with whom he had a child. He received the James Tait Black Award for his novel *Riceyman Steps* in 1923. Arnold Bennett died of typhoid in London on 27 March 1931.

ALSO BY ARNOLD BENNETT

Fiction

A Man from the North
The Grand Babylon Hotel
Anna of the Five Towns
The Gates of Wrath
Leonora
A Great Man
Teresa of Watling Street
Sacred and Profane Love
Tales of the Five Towns
Whom God Hath Joined
Hugo
The Grim Smile of the Five Towns
The Ghost
Buried Alive
The Card
Clayhanger
Helen with the High Hand
Hilda Lessways
The Matador of the Five Towns
The Regent
The Price of Love
These Twain
The Pretty Lady
The Roll-Call
Mr Prohack
Riceyman Steps

Elsie and the Child
Lord Raingo
The Woman who Stole Everything and Other Stories
The Vanguard
Accident
Imperial Palace
Venus Rising from the Sea

Non-fiction

Journalism for Women
Fame and Fiction
How to Become an Author
The Reasonable Life
Literary Taste: How to Form It
How to Live on 24 Hours a Day
Mental Efficiency
Those United States
Paris Nights and Other Impressions of Places and People
The Author's Craft
Self and Self-Management
Things That Have Interested Me
The Human Machine
The Savour of Life

ARNOLD BENNETT

The Old Wives' Tale

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Sathnam Sanghera

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

It says something about the beleaguered state of Arnold Bennett's literary reputation that even one of the tales occasionally churned out to convey his former renown does not quite stand up. The story – and there's more of a chance that you've heard it than that you've read one of his books – goes that when he lay dying in his Marylebone flat at the age of sixty-three, having contracted typhoid from a jug of untreated drinking water at a Parisian restaurant, the authorities made sure, out of concern and respect, that straw was laid on the road underneath his windows so that he would not be disturbed by road noise. However, Bennett died in 1931, when the motor age was in full swing and some 2.3 million motor vehicles were registered in Great Britain, according to government figures. And while straw may have worked to silence the clopping of horses' hooves and the grinding of iron-bound wheels upon cobblestones, it can't have been very effective with the modern equivalent.

Indeed, Bennett had earned so much from advances and royalties that he had owned a Rolls-Royce, which does a good job of conveying how far he had come from his working-class roots in the Potteries – along perhaps with the fact that he also, during his life, employed a chauffeur, owned yachts, ran a country home, counted Lord Beaverbrook, H. G. Wells and W. Somerset Maugham among his closest friends, and went on lucrative tours of America, where he was so popular that he had audiences with millionaires and was besieged by the autograph-hunting public.

In short, Bennett was something that very few writers ever become in their lifetime: a celebrity. He was so famous that when he split with his French wife Marguerite and she wrote a book about living with him, it was serialised by the *Daily Express*; that interior shots of his home in Cadogan Square appeared in a 1924 issue of *Vogue*; and that when he died it was national news, with *The Times* celebrating his life in an obituary that extended to well over 2,000 words, paying tribute to his 'exuberant talent' and describing *The Old Wives' Tale* as a 'masterpiece' that 'placed him in the front rank'.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Bennett and his books have since been completely forgotten. There is a certain kind of person – perhaps the kind who has thrust this book into your hands – who enjoys championing the wilfully obscure. And Bennett is subject to periodic revivals. There was one in the seventies when ITV broadcast a long adaptation of *Clayhanger*; another when *The Old Wives' Tale* was made into the 1988 BBC series *Sophia and Constance*; and in the 1990s the English critic John Carey praised Bennett in his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. Meanwhile the Modern Library had the wisdom to rank *The Old Wives' Tale* at number 87 on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the twentieth century. However, it is a reflection of Bennett's unfashionability in the twenty-first century that, if you google him, the first thing that comes up – after a short Wikipedia entry – is the recipe for the smoked-haddock-and-parmesan omelette that chefs at the Savoy created for him, and that his work only ever seems to get mentioned in conversations about neglected classics and literary longevity.

For what it's worth, I have my theories about why his literary fame has faded, the first of which is the banal fact that his name is too similar to Alan Bennett's: there is just not enough room in the public imagination for two men of

letters from the north with similar names. Second, he wrote about a part of the world – the Potteries – that has not only declined in importance as it has produced fewer and fewer actual pots, but, in the way Bennett wrote about it, never really existed. The six towns of Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton were amalgamated into the city of Stoke-on-Trent in 1910, but Bennett's 'five towns' of Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype and Longshaw were semi-fictionalised creations.

But a third factor is probably the most significant: Bennett simply wrote too much and inevitably, for all his talent, the quality had to suffer. How much did he churn out? Well, the most remarkable paragraph in Margaret Drabble's outstanding and moving biography concerns Bennett's productivity around the time he wrote *The Old Wives' Tale*, which he managed to complete in less than a year, between 1907 and 1908, while living in France:

> For a work of 200,000 words, of considerable constructional complexity, this was an achievement. But he also, during that period, wrote two complete short novels, *Helen with the High Hand* and *Buried Alive*, many articles, short stories, a scenario of *Antony and Cleopatra* for his friend Calvocoressi, toyed with the idea of publishing a book of poems, finished a play with Philpotts, wrote one or two books of popular philosophy, and saw his play, *Cupid and Commonsense*, on to the London stage. He also, during this period, managed to spend three months in England, from December 1907 to March 1908, and to move house.

(Drabble subsequently reveals that Bennett, who made notes in his journal about how many words he had written each day – a figure that sometimes exceeded 3,000 – wrote the manuscript by hand in beautiful calligraphy, having decided that he 'needed a hobby'.)

The Wesleyan work ethic imbued into him as a youth, and a defining trait of the Baines family in *The Old Wives' Tale*, doubtless played a role in this drive. But so did money. Bennett, whose long list of books included a self-help manual entitled *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1910), was

a self-made man, who, when he switched from rent-collecting and working as a solicitor's clerk to writing, could not afford to do so unless he was paid. But even when he started making lots of money – in 1916 his book *These Twain* sold a staggering 13,350 copies in its first week – he couldn't get out of the habit of writing. As he put it: 'Am I to sit still and see other fellows pocketing two guineas apiece for stories which I can do better myself? Not me. If anyone imagines my sole aim is art for art's sake, they are cruelly deceived.'

The downside of this approach was that when it came to the tricky business of literary reputation, not only did the sheer amount of his work make it hard to spot the gems, but the inconsistent quality intensified the sting of the attack when critics went for Bennett's good work, as Virginia Woolf famously did in 1924 in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, a pamphlet that is, more often than anything else, cited as the thing that 'did for' Bennett. Reading it nearly a century later, it still makes you wince for Bennett, as the pamphlet claims that reading work by Bennett (and H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy) to 'teach you how to write a novel – how to create characters that are real – is precisely like going to a bootmaker and asking him to teach you how to make a watch'. Woolf continues, 'Sometimes I wonder if we are right to call them books at all. For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction.'

However, when you get beyond the vitriol (and Drabble points out that it was essentially an 'overreaction' to Bennett's mild criticism of Woolf's own *Jacob's Room*), her argument that Bennett creates character by laying too much 'stress upon the fabric of things' – describing houses, clothes, 'rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines' when 'one line of insight would' do so much more – is essentially just a description of his style. And it is true that Bennett described and chronicled life rather than analysing it. His

style, as an ‘English realist’, was an attempt to import the truthful neutrality of Balzac and Zola, and involved taking an almost journalistic approach to fiction, recording insights and events without judgement. What Woolf does in her essay is exaggerate what this involved. And, let’s face it, any style of writing – even Woolf’s – can be made to sound ridiculous through parody.

I would argue that although Bennett is describing a particular part of England at a particular time, the end result is, paradoxically, timeless. And Woolf omits (or wilfully ignores) the fact that description is not the only tool Bennett uses to form character. There is dialogue and action, and the overall effect – as in *The Old Wives’ Tale* – can be stunning. Certainly characters like the imposing Mrs Baines, the malevolent Mr Critchlow and the irresponsible Gerald Scales leap off the page, while the two sisters at the heart of the book (the arrogant and charming Sophia, and the steadfast and immovable Constance) are two of the most memorable sisters in English literature.

Having said that, I’m not sure about the starting point of Woolf’s essay: Bennett’s own argument that ‘the foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else’. I, for one, read novels for lots of other reasons, and for me *The Old Wives’ Tale* is a triumph on many other fronts, not least for its insights into the generation gap (the poignancy of one generation watching the rise of the next); for the clash between the provincial and the metropolitan (even when Bennett is writing about Paris he is actually writing about Bursley); and for its female psychology (the male characters in *The Old Wives’ Tale* are dispensed with relatively quickly). Meanwhile modern-day CGI studios would struggle to compete with Bennett in conveying the effect of time on place and character, and he is masterful in his sensitive and subtle exploration of the institution of marriage.

It could be that this theme, explored through the contrast of three types of marriage (Sam Povey and Constance vs Sophia and Gerald vs Mr and Mrs Baines), struck me in particular because I come from a Punjabi immigrant community in Britain, where arranged marriages – and the age-old tension between love and duty – are as tangible an issue as they were for the Victorians and the Edwardians. And it could be that the book struck a particular chord with me because of all the other parallels between my own background as the child of Punjabi immigrants and life in the Potteries in the late nineteenth century. Working life was difficult and dangerous then just as it was for immigrants arriving to toil in Black Country factories in the 1950s and 1960s. Bennett's characters were obsessed with the acquisition of money and social status, and what Virginia Woolf might have dismissed as houses and 'external things', in the same way that Punjabi Sikh culture fetishises wealth over education. Surreally 'Bains', with the vowel dropped, is even a common Sikh surname.

At the time I was given *The Old Wives' Tale* to read I was developing the idea of a multi-generational Sikh family story, and I ended up using *The Old Wives' Tale* as a model for what became my second book and first novel, *Marriage Material* – moving the story forward by about a century, the setting thirty-four miles south of the Potteries to the West Midlands, and basing the characters in an Asian corner shop instead of a Victorian draper's shop.

I departed from Bennett on many fronts, and credited him in full, but nevertheless I worried that I would be accused of plagiarism. I shouldn't have done. It turns out that Bennett had fictional models of his own, which Louis Tillier, in *Studies in the Sources of Arnold Bennett's Novels*, cites as *Une Vie*, an 1883 novel by Guy de Maupassant, which tells the life story of one Jeanne de Lamare, and Honoré de Balzac's *La Maison du chat-qui pelote*, a novel that also revolves around two draper's daughters. Tillier

adds: ‘Although Bennett does not mention Balzac’s novel anywhere, it is hardly conceivable that such a passionate admirer of Balzac as he was could have been unacquainted with the work …’

Moreover, I was hardly being original in using *The Old Wives’ Tale* as a model. It turns out that various critics have argued that D. H. Lawrence’s 1911 provincial novel *The White Peacock* (which is narrated in the first person by a character named Cyril Beardsall, who bears some resemblance to Bennett’s Cyril) and his 1920 novel *The Lost Girl* (about Alvina Houghton, the daughter of a widowed Midlands draper) were inspired in part by *The Old Wives’ Tale*.

Bennett championed Lawrence’s writing and helped him out financially, once passing money to his agent to be given anonymously to the young writer. And it is such facts that have, for me, extended my admiration for his writing to admiration for the man. Growing up poor, doing mundane jobs in an unbeautiful part of the world, shy and afflicted with a stammer, Bennett turned himself, through sheer work and effort, into the most famous writer of his age. Despite his success (becoming a man that even Virginia Woolf acknowledged as ‘loveable’ and ‘genuine’ upon his death), he supported young talent and remained close to his family, writing to his mother regularly – sometimes sending as many as seven postcards on the same day.

He was often accused of snobbery, with the caricaturist Max Beerbohm portraying Bennett as a social climber who had forgotten his origins; and Somerset Maugham claiming, in a piece written after his death, that when Bennett was in Paris he was ‘cocksure and bumptious and … rather common’. But this does not tally with the fact that he refused a knighthood when it was offered, and throughout his writing career bore witness to how the working classes lived, worked and struggled. If anything, it seems to me that Bennett was the real victim of snobbery, a

result of the fact that he made his own money (disdain for the nouveau riche has long been an English disease), talked about how hard he worked (when one of the defining features of the upper classes is effortless superiority – achieving great feats with seemingly no effort) and made the mistake of simply being very successful at what he did. And, let's face it, nothing breeds snobbery like success.

But perhaps we should be careful not to feel too sorry for the man. For Bennett was read widely in his lifetime, which any writer would concede is better than the other way around. And the genius of *The Old Wives' Tale* was recognised immediately, with H. G. Wells describing it as 'Ripping. Enormous', and Frank Harris writing in *Vanity Fair* that it was 'a realistic novel of extraordinary merit … excellent … astonishingly well constructed … a masterpiece'. One just hopes that if Bennett had moments of clarity on his deathbed – with the straw ineffectually but respectfully laid on the road beneath his window, and the national newspapers publishing regular bulletins on his health – he was aware that he done something rare and important: that he had, through his art, touched upon the eternal.

Sathnam Sanghera, 2014

BOOK ONE: MRS BAINES

CHAPTER 1

The Square

I

Those two girls, Constance and Sophia Baines, paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious. They were, for example, established almost precisely on the fifty-third parallel of latitude. A little way to the north of them, in the creases of a hill famous for its religious orgies, rose the River Trent, the calm and characteristic stream of middle England. Somewhat further northwards, in the near neighbourhood of the highest public-house in the realm, rose two lesser rivers, the Dane and the Dove, which, quarrelling in early infancy, turned their backs on each other, and, the one by favour of the Weaver and the other by favour of the Trent, watered between them the whole width of England, and poured themselves respectively into the Irish Sea and the German Ocean. What a county of modest, unnoticed rivers! What a natural, simple county, content to fix its boundaries by these tortuous island brooks, with their comfortable names – Trent, Mease, Dove, Tern, Dane, Mees, Stour, Tame, and even hasty Severn! Not that the Severn is suitable to the county! In the county excess is deprecated. The county is happy in not exciting remark. It is content that Shropshire should possess that swollen bump, the Wrekin, and that the exaggerated wildness of the Peak should lie over its border. It does not desire to be a pancake like Cheshire. It has everything that England has, including thirty miles of Watling Street; and

England can show nothing more beautiful and nothing uglier than the works of nature and the works of man to be seen within the limits of the county. It is England in little, lost in the midst of England, unsung by searchers after the extreme; perhaps occasionally somewhat sore at this neglect, but how proud in the instinctive cognisance of its representative features and traits!

Constance and Sophia, busy with the intense preoccupations of youth, recked not of such matters. They were surrounded by the county. On every side the fields and moors of Staffordshire, intersected by roads and lanes, railways, watercourses, and telegraph-lines, patterned by hedges, ornamented and made respectable by halls and genteel parks, enlivened by villages at the intersections, and warmly surveyed by the sun, spread out undulating. And trains were rushing round curves in deep cuttings, and carts and wagons trotting and jingling on the yellow roads, and long, narrow boats passing in a leisure majestic and infinite over the surface of the stolid canals; the rivers had only themselves to support, for Staffordshire rivers have remained virgin of keels to this day. One could imagine the messages concerning prices, sudden death, and horses, in their flight through the wires under the feet of birds. In the inns Utopians were shouting the universe into order over beer, and in the halls and parks the dignity of England was being preserved in a fitting manner. The villages were full of women who did nothing but fight against dirt and hunger, and repair the effects of friction on clothes. Thousands of labourers were in the fields, but the fields were so broad and numerous that this scattered multitude was totally lost therein. The cuckoo was much more perceptible than man, dominating whole square miles with his resounding call. And on the airy moors heath-larks played in the ineffaceable mule-tracks that had served centuries before even the Romans thought of Watling Street. In short, the usual daily life of the county was

proceeding with all its immense variety and importance; but though Constance and Sophia were in it they were not of it.

The fact is, that while in the county they were also in the district; and no person who lives in the district, even if he should be old and have nothing to do but reflect upon things in general, ever thinks about the county. So far as the county goes, the district might almost as well be in the middle of the Sahara. It ignores the county, save that it uses it nonchalantly sometimes as leg-stretcher on holiday afternoons, as a man may use his back garden. It has nothing in common with the county; it is richly sufficient to itself. Nevertheless, its self-sufficiency and the true salt savour of its life can only be appreciated by picturing it hemmed in by county. It lies on the face of the county like an insignificant stain, like a dark Pleiades in a green and empty sky. And Hanbridge has the shape of a horse and its rider, Bursley of half a donkey, Knype of a pair of trousers, Longshaw of an octopus, and little Turnhill of a beetle. The Five Towns seem to cling together for safety. Yet the idea of clinging together for safety would make them laugh. They are unique and indispensable. From the north of the county right down to the south they alone stand for civilisation, applied science, organised manufacture, and the century – until you come to Wolverhampton. They are unique and indispensable because you cannot drink tea out of a teacup without the aid of the Five Towns because you cannot eat a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns. For this the architecture of the Five Towns is an architecture of ovens and chimneys; for this its atmosphere is as black as its mud; for this it burns and smokes all night, so that Longshaw has been compared to hell; for this it is unlearned in the ways of agriculture, never having seen corn except as packing straw and in quartern loaves; for this, on the other hand, it comprehends the mysterious habits of fire and pure, sterile earth; for this it lives

crammed together in slippery streets where the housewife must change white window-curtains at least once a fortnight if she wishes to remain respectable; for this it gets up in the mass at six a.m., winter and summer, and goes to bed when the public-houses close; for this it exists – that you may drink tea out of a teacup and toy with a chop on a plate. All the everyday crockery used in the kingdom is made in the Five Towns – all, and much besides. A district capable of such gigantic manufacture, of such a perfect monopoly – and which finds energy also to produce coal and iron and great men – may be an insignificant stain on a county, considered geographically, but it is surely well justified in treating the county as its back garden once a week, and in blindly ignoring it the rest of the time.

Even the majestic thought that whenever and wherever in all England a woman washes up, she washes up the product of the district; that whenever and wherever in all England a plate is broken the fracture means new business for the district – even this majestic thought had probably never occurred to either of the girls. The fact is, that while in the Five Towns they were also in the Square, Bursley, and the Square ignored the staple manufacture as perfectly as the district ignored the county. Bursley has the honours of antiquity in the Five Towns. No industrial development can ever rob it of its superiority in age, which makes it absolutely sure in its conceit. And the time will never come when the other towns – let them swell and bluster as they may – will not pronounce the name of Bursley as one pronounces the name of one's mother. Add to this that the Square was the centre of Bursley's retail trade (which scorned the staple as something wholesale, vulgar, and assuredly filthy), and you will comprehend the importance and the self-isolation of the Square in the scheme of the created universe. There you have it, embedded in the district, and the district embedded in the county, and the county lost and dreaming in the heart of England!

The Square was named after St Luke. The evangelist might have been startled by certain phenomena in his square, but, except in Wakes Week, when the shocking always happened, St Luke's Square lived in a manner passably saintly – though it contained five public-houses. It contained five public-houses, a bank, a barber's, a confectioner's, three grocers', two chemists', an ironmonger's, a clothier's, and five drapers'. These were all the catalogue. St Luke's Square had no room for minor establishments. The aristocracy of the Square undoubtedly consisted of the drapers (for the bank was impersonal); and among the five the shop of Baines stood supreme. No business establishment could possibly be more respected than that of Mr Baines was respected. And though John Baines had been bedridden for a dozen years, he still lived on the lips of admiring, ceremonious burgesses as 'our honoured fellow-townsman.' He deserved his reputation.

The Baineses' shop, to make which three dwellings had at intervals been thrown into one, lay at the bottom of the Square. It formed about one-third of the south side of the Square, the remainder being made up of Critchlow's (chemist), the clothier's, and the Hanover Spirit Vaults. ('Vaults' was a favourite synonym of the public-house in the Square. Only two of the public-houses were crude public-houses: the rest were 'vaults'.) It was a composite building of three storey, in blackish-crimson brick, with a projecting shop-front and, above and behind that, two rows of little windows. On the sash of each window was a red cloth roll stuffed with sawdust, to prevent draughts; plain white blinds descended about six inches from the top of each window. There were no curtains to any of the windows save one; this was the window of the drawing-room, on the first floor at the corner of the Square and King Street. Another window, on the second storey, was peculiar, in that it had neither blind nor pad, and was very dirty; this was the window of an unused room that had a separate staircase to

itself, the staircase being barred by a door always locked. Constance and Sophia had lived in continual expectation of the abnormal issuing from that mysterious room, which was next to their own. But they were disappointed. The room had no shameful secret except the incompetence of the architect who had made one house out of three; it was just an empty, unemployable room. The building had also a considerable frontage on King Street, where, behind the shop, was sheltered the parlour, with a large window and a door that led directly by two steps into the street. A strange peculiarity of the shop was that it bore no signboard. Once it had had a large signboard which a memorable gale had blown into the Square. Mr Baines had decided not to replace it. He had always objected to what he called ‘puffing,’ and for this reason would never hear of such a thing as a clearance sale. The hatred of ‘puffing’ grew on him until he came to regard even a sign as ‘puffing’. Uninformed persons who wished to find Baines’s must ask and learn. For Mr Baines, to have replaced the sign would have been to condone, yea, to participate in, the modern craze for unscrupulous self-advertisement. This abstention of Mr Baines’s from indulgence in signboards was somehow accepted by the more thoughtful members of the community as evidence that the height of Mr Baines’s principles was greater even than they had imagined.

Constance and Sophia were the daughters of this credit to human nature. He had no other children.

II

They pressed their noses against the window of the showroom, and gazed down into the Square as perpendicularly as the projecting front of the shop would allow. The showroom was over the millinery and silken half of the shop. Over the woollen and shirting half were the

drawing-room and the chief bedroom. When in quest of articles of coquetry, you mounted from the shop by a curving stair, and your head gradually rose level with the large apartment having a mahogany counter in front of the window and along one side, yellow linoleum on the floor, many cardboard boxes, a magnificent hinged cheval glass, and two chairs. The windowsill being lower than the counter, there was a gulf between the panes and the back of the counter; into which important articles such as scissors, pencils, chalk, and artificial flowers were continually disappearing: another proof of the architect's incompetence.

The girls could only press their noses against the window by kneeling on the counter, and this they were doing. Constance's nose was snub, but agreeably so. Sophia had a fine Roman nose; she was a beautiful creature, beautiful and handsome at the same time. They were both of them rather like racehorses, quivering with delicate, sensitive, and luxuriant life; exquisite, enchanting proof of the circulation of the blood; innocent, artful, roguish, prim, gushing, ignorant, and miraculously wise. Their ages were sixteen and fifteen; it is an epoch when, if one is frank, one must admit that one has nothing to learn: one has learnt simply everything in the previous six months.

'There she goes!' exclaimed Sophia.

Up the Square, from the corner of King Street, passed a woman in a new bonnet with pink strings and a new blue dress that sloped at the shoulders and grew to a vast circumference at the hem. Through the silent sunlit solitude of the Square (for it was Thursday afternoon, and all the shops shut except the confectioner's and one chemist's) this bonnet and this dress floated northwards in search of romance, under the relentless eyes of Constance and Sophia. Within them, somewhere, was the soul of Maggie, domestic servant at Baines's. Maggie had been at the shop since before the creation of Constance and

Sophia. She lived seventeen hours of each day in an underground kitchen and larder, and the other seven in an attic, never going out except to chapel on Sunday evenings, and once a month on Thursday afternoons. ‘Followers’ were most strictly forbidden to her; but on rare occasions an aunt from Longshaw was permitted as a tremendous favour to see her in the subterranean den. Everybody, including herself, considered that she had a good ‘place’, and was well treated. It was undeniable, for instance, that she was allowed to fall in love exactly as she chose, provided she did not ‘carry on’ in the kitchen or the yard. And as a fact, Maggie had fallen in love. In seventeen years she had been engaged eleven times. No one could conceive how that ugly and powerful organism could softly languish to the undoing of even a butty-collier, nor why, having caught a man in her sweet toils, she could ever be imbecile enough to set him free. There are, however, mysteries in the souls of Maggies. The drudge had probably been affianced oftener than any woman in Bursley. Her employers were so accustomed to an interesting announcement that for years they had taken to saying naught in reply but ‘Really, Maggie!’ Engagements and tragic partings were Maggie’s pastime. Fixed otherwise, she might have studied the piano instead.

‘No gloves, of course!’ Sophia criticised.

‘Well, you can’t expect her to have gloves,’ said Constance.

Then a pause, as the bonnet and dress neared the top of the Square.

‘Supposing she turns round and sees us?’ Constance suggested.

‘I don’t care if she does,’ said Sophia, with a haughtiness almost impassioned; and her head trembled slightly.

There were, as usual, several loafers at the top of the Square, in the corner between the bank and the Marquis of Granby. And one of these loafers stepped forward and shook hands with an obviously willing Maggie. Clearly it

was a rendezvous, open, unashamed. The twelfth victim had been selected by the virgin of forty, whose kiss would not have melted lard! The couple disappeared together down Oldcastle Street.

'*Well!*' cried Constance. 'Did you ever see such a thing?'

While Sophia, short of adequate words, flushed and bit her lip.

With the profound, instinctive cruelty of youth, Constance and Sophia had assembled in their favourite haunt, the showroom, expressly to deride Maggie in her new clothes. They obscurely thought that a woman so ugly and soiled as Maggie was had no right to possess new clothes. Even her desire to take the air of a Thursday afternoon seemed to them unnatural and somewhat reprehensible. Why should she want to stir out of her kitchen? As for her tender yearnings, they positively grudged these to Maggie. That Maggie should give rein to chaste passion was more than grotesque; it was offensive and wicked. But let it not for an instant be doubted that they were nice, kind-hearted, well-behaved, and delightful girls! Because they were. They were not angels.

'It's too ridiculous!' said Sophia, severely. She had youth, beauty, and rank in her favour. And to her it really was ridiculous.

'Poor old Maggie!' Constance murmured. Constance was foolishly good-natured, a perfect manufactory of excuses for other people; and her benevolence was eternally rising up and overpowering her reason.

'What time did mother say she should be back?' Sophia asked.

'Not until supper.'

'Oh! Hallelujah!' Sophia burst out, clasping her hands in joy. And they both slid down from the counter just as if they had been little boys, and not, as their mother called them, 'great girls'.

‘Let’s go and play the Osborne quadrilles,’ Sophia suggested (the Osborne quadrilles being a series of dances arranged to be performed on drawing-room pianos by four jewelled hands).

‘I couldn’t think of it,’ said Constance, with a precocious gesture of seriousness. In that gesture, and in her tone, was something which conveyed to Sophia: ‘Sophia, how can you be so utterly blind to the gravity of our fleeting existence as to ask me to go and strum the piano with you?’ Yet a moment before she had been a little boy.

‘Why not?’ Sophia demanded.

‘I shall never have another chance like today for getting on with this,’ said Constance, picking up a bag from the counter.

She sat down and took from the bag a piece of loosely woven canvas, on which she was embroidering a bunch of roses in coloured wools. The canvas had once been stretched on a frame, but now, as the delicate labour of the petals and leaves was done, and nothing remained to do but the monotonous background, Constance was content to pin the stuff to her knee. With the long needle and several skeins of mustard-tinted wool, she bent over the canvas and resumed the filling-in of the tiny squares. The whole design was in squares – the gradations of red and greens, the curves of the smallest buds – all was contrived in squares, with a result that mimicked a fragment of uncompromising Axminster carpet. Still, the fine texture of the wool, the regular and rapid grace of those fingers moving incessantly at back and front of the canvas, the gentle sound of the wool as it passed through the holes, and the intent, youthful earnestness of that lowered gaze, excused and invested with charm an activity which, on artistic grounds, could not possibly be justified. The canvas was destined to adorn a gilt fire-screen in the drawing-room, and also to form a birthday gift to Mrs Baines from her elder daughter.

But whether the enterprise was as secret from Mrs Baines as Constance hoped, none save Mrs Baines knew.

'Con,' murmured Sophia, 'you're too sickening sometimes.'

'Well,' said Constance, blandly, 'it's no use pretending that this hasn't got to be finished before we go back to school, because it has.'

Sophia wandered about, a prey ripe for the Evil One. 'Oh,' she exclaimed joyously – even ecstatically – looking behind the cheval glass, 'here's mother's new skirt! Miss Dunn's been putting the gimp on it! Oh, mother, what a proud thing you will be!'

Constance heard swishings behind the glass. 'What are you doing, Sophia?'

'Nothing.'

'You surely aren't putting that skirt on?'

'Why not?'

'You'll catch it finely, I can tell you!'

Without further defence, Sophia sprang out from behind the immense glass. She had already shed a notable part of her own costume, and the flush of mischief was in her face. She ran across to the other side of the room and examined carefully a large coloured print that was affixed to the wall.

This print represented fifteen sisters, all of the same height and slimness of figure, all of the same age – about twenty-five or so, and all with exactly the same haughty and bored beauty. That they were in truth sisters was clear from the facial resemblance between them; their demeanour indicated that they were princesses, offspring of some impossibly prolific king and queen. Those hands had never toiled, nor had those features ever relaxed from the smile of courts. The princesses moved in a landscape of marble steps and verandas, with a bandstand and strange trees in the distance. One was in a riding-habit, another in evening attire, another dressed for tea, another for the theatre; another seemed to be ready to go to bed. One held

a little girl by the hand; it could not have been her own little girl, for these princesses were far beyond human passions. Where had she obtained the little girl? Why was one sister going to the theatre, another to tea, another to the stable, and another to bed? Why was one in a heavy mantle, and another sheltering from the sun's rays under a parasol? The picture was drenched in mystery, and the strangest thing about it was that all these highnesses were apparently content with the most ridiculous and outmoded fashions. Absurd hats, with veils flying behind; absurd bonnets, fitting close to the head, and spotted; absurd coiffures that nearly lay on the nape; absurd, clumsy sleeves; absurd waists, almost above the elbow's level; absurd scalloped jackets! And the skirts! What a sight were those skirts! They were nothing but vast decorated pyramids; on the summit of each was stuck the upper half of a princess. It was astounding that princesses should consent to be so preposterous and so uncomfortable. But Sophia perceived nothing uncanny in the picture, which bore the legend: 'Newest summer fashions from Paris. Gratis supplement to *Myra's Journal.*' Sophia had never imagined anything more stylish, lovely, and dashing than the raiment of the fifteen princesses.

For Constance and Sophia had the disadvantage of living in the middle ages. The crinoline had not quite reached its full circumference, and the dress-improver had not even been thought of. In all the Five Towns there was not a public bath, nor a free library, nor a municipal park, nor a telephone, nor yet a board-school. People had not understood the vital necessity of going away to the seaside every year. Bishop Colenso had just staggered Christianity by his shameless notions on the Pentateuch. Half Lancashire was starving on account of the American war. Garrotting was the chief amusement of the homicidal classes. Incredible as it may appear, there was nothing but a horse-tram running between Bursley and Hanbridge –

and that only twice an hour; and between the other towns no stage of any kind! One went to Longshaw as one now goes to Pekin. It was an era so dark and backward that one might wonder how people could sleep in their beds at night for thinking about their sad state.

Happily the inhabitants of the Five Towns in that era were passably pleased with themselves, and they never even suspected that they were not quite modern and quite awake. They thought that the intellectual, the industrial, and the social movements had gone about as far as these movements could go, and they were amazed at their own progress. Instead of being humble and ashamed, they actually showed pride in their pitiful achievements. They ought to have looked forward meekly to the prodigious feats of posterity; but, having too little faith and too much conceit, they were content to look behind and make comparisons with the past. They did not foresee the miraculous generation which is us. A poor, blind, complacent people! The ludicrous horse-car was typical of them. The driver rang a huge bell, five minutes before starting that could be heard from the Wesleyan chapel to the Cock Yard, and then after deliberations and hesitations the vehicle rolled off on its rails into unknown dangers while passengers shouted goodbye. At Bleakridge it had to stop for the turnpike, and it was assisted up the mountains of Leveson Place and Sutherland Street (towards Hanbridge) by a third horse, on whose back was perched a tiny, whip-cracking boy; that boy lived like a shuttle on the road between Leveson Place and Sutherland Street, and even in wet weather he was the envy of all other boys. After half an hour's perilous transit the car drew up solemnly in a narrow street by the *Signal* office in Hanbridge, and the ruddy driver, having revolved many times the polished iron handle of his sole brake, turned his attention to his passengers in calm triumph, dismissing them with a sort of unsung doxology.