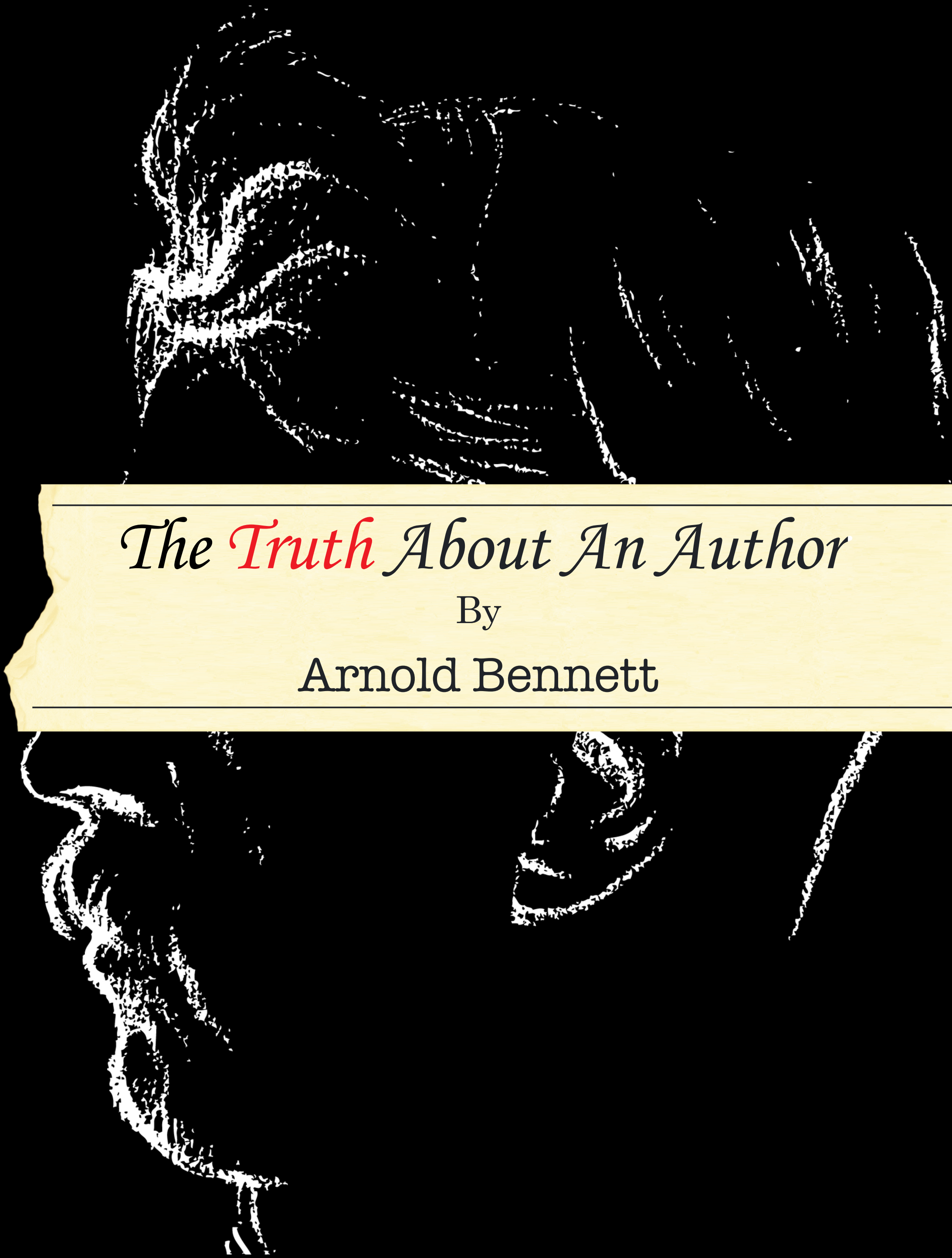

The Truth About An Author

By

Arnold Bennett

Includes "Arnold Bennett" by P. J. Harvey Darton

The Truth About An Author

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Arnold Bennett

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Truth About An Author

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Textual Note

The Truth About An Author first appeared serially in *The Academy*. It was first published in book form by Archibald Constable & CO Ltd. in 1903 and received a second printing from the George H. Doran Company in 1911. The text used here is a combination of these two printings, which includes both the "Note" (absent from the second printing) and the "Author's Preface" (absent from the first printing), in order to provide the most complete and comprehensive version of the book. Some obvious errors have been silently corrected.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

ARNOLD BENNETT

SOMETIME in the last century I was for several years one of the most regular contributors to The Academy under the editorship of Mr. Lewis Hind and the ownership of Mr. Morgan Richards. The work was constant; but the pay was bad, as it too often is where a paper has ideals. I well remember the day when, by dint of amicable menaces, I got the rate raised in my favor from ten to fifteen shillings a column, with a minimum of two guineas an article for exposing the fatuity of popular idols. One evening I met Mr. Lewis Hind at the first performance of some very important play, whose name I forget, in the stalls of some theater whose name I forget. (However, the theater has since been demolished) We began to talk about *The Academy*, and as I was an editor myself, I felt justified in offering a little advice to a fellow-creature. "What you want in *The Academy*," I said, "is a sensational serial." "Yes, I know," he replied, with that careful laziness of tone which used to mark his more profound utterances, "and I should like you to write your literary autobiography for us!" In this singular manner was the notion of the following book first presented to me. It was not in the least my own notion.

I began to write the opening chapters immediately, for I was fascinated by this opportunity to tell the truth about the literary life, and my impatience would not wait. I had been earning a living by my pen for a number of years, and my experience of the business did not at all correspond with anything that I had ever read in print about the literary life, whether optimistic or pessimistic. I took a malicious and frigid pleasure, as I always do, in setting down facts which are opposed to accepted sentimental falsities; and certainly I did not spare myself. It did not occur to me, even in the midst of my immense conceit, to spare myself. But even had I been tempted to spare myself I should not have done so, because there is no surer way of damping the reader's interest than to spare oneself in a recital which concerns oneself.

The sensational serial ran in *The Academy* for about three months, but I had written it all in the spare hours of a very much shorter period than that. It was issued anonymously, partly from discretion, and partly in the hope that the London world of letters would indulge in conjecture as to its authorship, which in theory was to be kept a dark secret. The London world of letters, however, did nothing of the kind. Everybody who had any interest in such a matter seemed to know at once the name of the author. Mr. Andrew Chatto, whose acquaintance I made just then, assured me that he was certain of the authorship of the first article, on stylistic evidence and I found him tearing out the pages of *The Academy* and keeping them. I found also a number of other people doing the same. In fact I do not exaggerate in saying that the success of the serial was terrific—among about a hundred people. It happened to me to see quite sane and sober writing persons gurgle with joy over the mere recollection of sundry scenes in my autobiography. But Mr. Andrew Chatto, an expert of immense experience, gave me his opinion, with perhaps even more than his customary blandness, that the public would have no use for my autobiography. I could scarcely adopt his view. It seemed to me impossible that so honest a disclosure, which had caused such unholy joy in some of the most weary hearts that London contains, should pass unheeded by a more general public.

Mr. Andrew Chatto did not publish this particular book of mine. I cannot remember if it was offered to him. But I know that it was offered to sundry other publishers before at last it found a sponsor. There was no wild competition for it, and there was no excitement in the press when it appeared. On the other hand, there was a great deal of excitement among my friends. The book divided my friends into two camps. A few were extraordinarily enthusiastic and delighted. But the majority were shocked. Some—and among these the most intimate and beloved—were so shocked that they could not bear to speak to me about the book, and to this day have never mentioned it to me. Frankly, I was startled. I suppose the book was too true. Many fine souls can only take the truth in very small doses, when it is the truth about some one or something they love. One of my friends—nevertheless a realistic novelist of high rank—declined to credit that I had been painting myself; he insisted on treating the central character as fictional, while admitting the events described were factual.

The reviews varied from the flaccid indifferent to the ferocious. No other book of mine ever had such a bad press, or anything like such a bad press. Why respectable and dignified organs should have been moved to fury by the publication of a work whose veracity cannot be impugned, I have never been quite able to understand; for I attacked no financial interests; I did not attack any interest; I merely destroyed a few illusions and make-believes. Yet such organs as *The Athenaeum* and *Blackwood's* dragged forward their heaviest artillery against the anonymous author. In its most virulent days *Blackwood's* could scarcely have been more murderous. Its remarks upon me will bear comparison even with its notorious attack, by the same well-known hand, on Mr. Bernard Shaw. I had, of course, ample opportunities for adjusting the balance between myself and the well-known hand, which opportunities I did not entirely neglect. Also I was convinced that the time had arrived for avowing the authorship, and I immediately included the book in the official list of my publications. Till then the dark secret had only once been divulged in the press—by Sir W. Robertson Nicoll. But this journalist, whose interest in the literary life is probably unsurpassed, refrained from any criticism.

I have purposely forgotten the number of copies sold. It was the smallest in my experience of infinitesimal numbers. In due season the publishers—to my regret, and conceivably now to theirs—”remaindered” the poor red-and-green volume. And *The Times Book Club*, having apparently become possessed of a large stock of the work, offered it, with my name but without my authority, at a really low price. I think the first bargain was five pence, but later six- pence was demanded. As *The Times Book Club* steadily continued to advertise the book, I suppose that at sixpence it must have had quite a vogue. At any rate it has been quoted from with more freedom than any other book of mine, and has indeed obviously formed the basis of dozens of articles—especially in the United States—of which the writers have omitted to offer me any share in their remuneration. I have myself bought copies of it at as high as a shilling apiece, as a speculation. And now here, after about a dozen years, is a new edition, reproducing word for word the original text in all its ingenuous self-complacency.

Note

This work is not a novel, but a faithful and candid record of facts. It owes its existence to the Editor of The Academy, *at whose suggestion it was written, in whose paper it ran as a serial, and by whose courteous permission it is now here reprinted.*

- Arnold Bennett

CHAPTER 1

"Was I, too, an artist?"

I, who now reside permanently on that curious fourth-dimensional planet which we call the literary world; I, who follow the incredible parasitic trade of talking about what people have done, who am a sort of public weighing-machine upon which bookish wares must halt before passing from the factory to the consumer; I, who habitually think in articles, who exist by phrases; I, who seize life at the pen's point and callously wrest from it the material which I torture into confections styled essays, short stories, novels, and plays; who perceive in passion chiefly a theme, and in tragedy chiefly a “situation”; who am so morbidly avaricious of beauty that I insist on finding it where even it is not; I, in short, who have been victimized to the last degree by a literary temperament, and glory in my victimhood, am going to trace as well as I can the phenomena of the development of that idiosyncracy from its inception to such maturity as it has attained. To explain it, to explain it away, I shall make no attempt; I know that I cannot. I lived for a quarter of a century without guessing that I came under the category of Max Nordau’s polysyllabic accusations; the trifling foolish mental discipline, which stands to my credit was obtained in science schools, examination rooms, and law offices. I grew into a good man of business; and my knowledge of affairs, my faculty for the nice conduct of negotiations, my skill in suggesting an escape from a dilemma, were often employed to serve the many artists among whom, by a sheer and highly improbable accident, I was thrown. While sincerely admiring and appreciating these people, in another way I condescended to them as beings apart and peculiar, and unable to take care of themselves on the asphalt of cities; I felt towards them as a policeman at a crossing feels towards pedestrians. Proud of my hard, cool head, I used to twit them upon the disadvantages of possessing an artistic temperament. Then, one day, one of them retorted : “ You’ve got it as badly as any of us, if you only knew it.” I laughed tolerantly at the remark, but it was like a thunderclap in my ears, a sudden and disconcerting revelation.

Was I, too, an artist? I lay awake at night asking myself this question. Something hitherto dormant stirred mysteriously in me; some- thing apparently foreign awoke in my hard, cool head, and a duality henceforth existed there. On a certain memorable day I saw tears in the eyes of a woman as she read some verses which, with journalistic versatility, I had written to the order of a musical composer. I walked straight out into the street, my heart beating like a horrid metronome. Am I an artist? I demanded; and the egotist replied: Can you doubt it?

From that moment I tacitly assumed a quite new set of possibilities, and deliberately ordered the old ruse self to exploit the self just born.

And so, by encouragement and fostering, by intuition and imitation, and perhaps affectation, I gradually became the thing I am, the *djinn* that performs tricks with some emotions, a pen, and paper. And now, having shadowed forth the tale, as Browning did in the prologue to *The Ring and the Book*, I will proceed to amplify it.

> Let this old woe step on the stage again!
> Act itself o'er anew for men to judge.

CHAPTER 2

"Mad on water-colors"

MY dealings with literature go back, I suppose, some thirty and three years. We came together thus, literature and I. It was in a kitchen at midday, and I was waiting for my dinner, hungry and clean, in a tartan frock with a pinafore over it. I had washed my own face, and dried it, and I remember that my eyes smarted with lingering soap, and my skin was drawn by the evaporation of moisture on a cold day. I held in my hand a single leaf which had escaped from a printed book. How it came into that chubby fist I cannot recall. The reminiscence begins with it already there. I gazed hard at the paper, and pretended with all my powers to be completely absorbed in its contents; I pretended to ignore some one who was rattling saucepans at the kitchen range. On my left a very long and mysterious passage led to a pawnshop all full of black bundles. I heard my brother crying at the other end of the passage, and his noisy naughtiness offended me. For myself, I felt excessively "good" with my paper; never since have I been so filled with the sense of perfect righteousness. Here was I, clean, quiet, sedate, studious; and there was my brother, the illiterate young Hooligan, disturbing the sacrosanct shop, and—what was worse—ignorant of his inferiority to me. Disgusted with him, I passed through the kitchen into another shop on the right, still conning the page with soapy, smarting eyes. At this point the light of memory is switched off. The printed matter, which sprang out of nothingness, vanishes back into the same.

I could not read, I could not distinguish one letter from another. I only knew that the signs and wonders constituted print, and I played at reading with intense earnestness. I actually felt learned, serious, wise, and competently superior, something like George Meredith's *Dr. Middleton*. Would that I could identify this my very first literature! I review three or four hundred books annually now; out of crass, saccharine, sentimentality, I would give a year's harvest for the volume from which that leaf was torn, nay, for the leaf alone, as though it might be a Caxton. I remember that the paper was faintly bluish in tint, veined, and rather brittle. The book was probably printed in the eighteenth century. Perhaps it was Lavater's *Physiognomy* or Blair's *Sermons*, or Burnet's *Own Time*. One of these three, I fancy, it must surely have been.

After the miraculous appearance and disappearance of that torn leaf, I remember almost nothing of literature for several years. I was six or so when *The Ugly Duckling* aroused in me the melancholy of life, gave me to see the deep sadness which pervades all romance, beauty, and adventure. I laughed heartily at the old hen-bird's wise remark that the world extended past the next field and much farther; I could perceive the humor of that. But when the ugly duckling at last flew away on his strong pinions, and when he met the swans and was accepted as an equal, then I felt sorrowful, agreeably sorrowful. It seemed to me that nothing could undo, atone for, the grief and humiliations of the false duckling's early youth. I brooded over the injustice of his misfortunes for days, and the swans who welcomed him struck me as proud, cold, and supercilious in their politeness. I have never read *The Ugly Duckling* since those days. It survives in my memory as a long and complex narrative, crowded with vague and mysterious allusions, and wet with the tears of things. No novel—it was a prodigious novel for me—has more deliciously disturbed me, not even *On the Eve* or *Lost Illusions*. Two years later I read *Hiawatha*. The picture which I formed of Minnehaha remains vividly and crudely with me; it resembles a simpering waxen doll of austere habit. Nothing else can I recall of *Hiawatha*, save odd lines, and a few names such as Gitchee-Gumee. I did not much care for the tale. Soon after I read it, I see a vision of a jolly-faced house-painter graining a door. “What do you call that?” I asked him, pointing to some very peculiar piece of graining, and he replied, gravely: “That, young sir, is a wigwam to wind the moon up with.” I privately decided that he must have read, not “Hiawatha”, but something similar and stranger, something even more wig-wammy. I dared not question him further, because he was so witty.

I remember no other literature for years. But at the age of eleven I became an author. I was at school under a master who was entirely at the mercy of the new notions that daily occurred to him. He introduced games quite fresh to us, he taught us to fence and to do the lesser circle on the horizontal bar; he sailed model yachts for us on the foulest canal in Europe; he played us into school to a march of his own composing performed on a harmonium by himself; he started a debating society and an amateur dramatic club. He even talked about our honor, and, having mentioned it, audaciously left many important things to its care—with what frightful results I forget. Once he suffered the spell of literature, read us a poem of his own, and told us that any one who tried could write poetry. As it were to prove his statement, he ordered us all to write a poem on the subject of Courage within a week, and promised to crown the best poet with a rich gift. Having been commanded to produce a poem on the subject of Courage, I produced a poem on the subject of Courage in, what seemed to me, the most natural manner in the world. I thought of lifeboats and fire-engines, and decided on lifeboats for the mere reason that "wave" and "save" would rhyme together. A lifeboat, then, was to save the crew of a wrecked ship. Next, what was poetry? I desired a model structure which I might copy. Turning to a school hymn-book I found—

> A little ship was on the sea.
>   It was a pretty sight;
> It sailed along so pleasantly
>   And all was calm and bright.

That stanza I adopted, and slavishly imitated. In a brief space a poem of four such stanzas was accomplished. I wrote it in cold blood, hammered it out word after word, and was much pleased with the result. On the following day I read the poem aloud to myself, and was thrilled with emotion. The dashing cruel "wave" that rhymed with "save" appeared to me intensely realistic. I failed to conceive how any poem could be better than mine. The sequel is that only one other boy besides myself had even attempted verse. One after another, each sullenly said that he had nothing to show. (How clever *I* felt!) Then I saw my rival's composition; it dealt with a fire in New York and many fire-engines; I did not care for it; I could not make sense of much of it; but I saw with painful clearness that it was as far above mine as the heaven was above the earth...

"Did you write this yourself?" The master was addressing the creator of New York fire-engines.

"Yes, sir."

"All of it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You lie, sir."

It was magnificent for me. The fool, my rival, relying too fondly on the master's ignorance of modern literature, had simply transcribed entire the work of some great American recitation-monger. I received the laurel, which I fancy amounted to a shilling.

Nothing dashed by the fiasco of his poetry competition; the schoolmaster immediately instituted a competition in prose. He told us about M. Jourdain, who talked prose without knowing it, and requested us each to write a short story upon any theme we might choose to select. I produced the story with the same ease and certainty as I had produced the verse. I had no difficulty in finding a plot which satisfied me; it was concerned with a drowning accident at the seaside, and it culminated—with a remorseless naturalism that even thus early proclaimed the elective affinity between Flaubert and myself—in an inquest. It described the wonders of the deep, and I have reason to remember that it likened the gap between the fin and the side of a fish to a pocket. In this competition I had no competitor. I, alone, had achieved fiction. I watched the master as he read my work, and I could see from his eyes and gestures that he thought it marvelously good for the boy. He spoke to me about it in a tone which I had never heard from him before and never heard again, and then, putting the manuscript in a drawer, he left us to ourselves for a few minutes.

"I'll just read it to you," said the big boy of the form, a daring but vicious rascal. He usurped the pedagogic armchair, found the manuscript, rapped the ruler on the desk, and began to read. I protested in vain. The whole class roared with laughter, and I was overcome with shame. I know that I, eleven, cried. Presently the reader stopped and scratched his head; the form waited.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Fishes have pockets! Fishes have pockets!"

The phrase was used as a missile against me for months.

The master returned with his assistant, and the latter also perused the tale.

"Very remarkable!" he sagely commented—to be sage was his foible, "very remarkable, indeed!"

Yet I can remember no further impulse to write a story for at least ten years. Despite this astonishing success, martyrdom, and glory, I forthwith abandoned fiction and went mad on water-colors.

CHAPTER 3

"Certainly: I was a journalist"

THE insanity of water-colors must have continued for many years. I say insanity, because I can plainly perceive now that I had not the slightest genuine aptitude for graphic art. In the curriculum of South Kensington as taught at a provincial art school I never got beyond the stage known technically as "third-grade freehand", and even in that my "lining-in" was considered to be a little worse than mediocre. O floral forms, how laboriously I deprived you of the grace of your Hellenic convention! As for the "round" and the "antique", as for pigments, these mysteries were withheld from me by South Kensington. It was at home, drawn on by a futile but imperious fascination, that I practiced them, and water-colors in particular. I never went to nature; I had not the skill, nor do I remember that I felt any sympathetic appreciation of nature. I was content to copy. I wasted the substance of uncles and aunts in a complicated and imposing apparatus of easels, mahl-sticks, boards, Whatman, camel-hair, and labeled tubes. I rose early, I cheated school and office, I outraged the sanctity of the English Sabbath, merely to satisfy an ardor of copying. I existed on the Grand Canal in Venice; at Toledo, Nuremburg, and Delft; and on slopes commanding a view of Turner's ruined abbeys, those abbeys through whose romantic windows streamed a yellow moonlight inimitable by any combination of ochre, lemon, and gamboge in my paint-box. Every replica that I produced was the history of a disillusion. With what a sanguine sweep I laid on the first broad washes—the pure blue of water, the misty rose of sun-steeped palaces, the translucent sapphire of Venetian and Spanish skies! And then what a horrible muddying ensued, what a fading-away of magic and defloration of hopes, as in detail after detail the picture gradually lost tone and clarity! It is to my credit that I was always disgusted by the fatuity of these efforts. I have not yet ceased to wonder what precise part of the supreme purpose was served by seven or eight years of them.

From fine I turned to applied art, diverted by a periodical called *The Girl's Own Paper*. For a long period this monthly, which I now regard as quaint, but which I shall never despise, was my principal instrument of culture. It alone blew upon the spark of artistic feeling and kept it alive. I derived from it my first ideals of aesthetic and of etiquette. Under its influence my brother and myself started on a revolutionary campaign against all the accepted canons of house decoration. We invented friezes, dadoes, and panels; we cut stencils; and we carried out our bright designs through half a house. It was magnificent, glaring, and immense; it foreshadowed the modern music-hall. Visitors were shown through our rooms by parents who tried in vain to hide from us their parental complacency. The professional house-decorator was reduced to speechless admiration of our originality and extraordinary enterprise; he really was struck—he could appreciate the difficulties we had conquered.

During all this, and with a succession of examinations continually looming ahead, literature never occurred to me; it was forgotten. I worked in a room lined with perhaps a couple of thousand volumes, but I seldom opened any of them. Still, I must have read a great deal, mechanically, and without enthusiasm: serials, and boys' books. At twenty-one I know that I had read almost nothing of Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, and George Eliot. An adolescence devoted to water-colors has therefore made it forever impossible for me to emulate, in my functions of critic, the allusive Langism of Mr. Andrew Lang; but on the other hand, it has conferred on me the rare advantage of being in a position to approach the classics and the alleged classics with a mind entirely unprejudiced by early recollections. Thus I read *David Copperfield* for the first time at thirty, after I had written a book or two and some hundreds of articles myself. The one author whom as a youth I "devoured" was Ouida, creator of the incomparable Strathmore, the Strathmore upon whose wrath the sun unfortunately went down. I loved Ouida much for the impassioned nobility of her style, but more for the scenes of gilded vice into which she introduced me. She it was who inspired me with that taste for *liaisons* under pink lampshades which I shall always have, but which, owing to a puritanical ancestry and upbringing, I shall never be able to satisfy. Not even the lesson of Prince lo's martyrdom in *Friendship* could cure me of this predilection that I blush for. Yes, Ouida was the unique fountain of romance for me. Of poetry, save *Hiawatha* and the enforced and tedious Shakespeare of schools, I had read nothing.

The principal local daily offered to buy approved short stories from local readers at a guinea apiece. Immediately I wrote one. What, beyond the chance of a guinea, made me turn so suddenly to literature I cannot guess; it was eight years since I had sat down as a creative artist. But I may mention here that I have never once produced any literary work without a preliminary incentive quite other than the incentive of ebullient imagination. I have never “wanted to write”, until the extrinsic advantages of writing had presented themselves to me. I cannot recall that I found any difficulty in concocting the story. The heroine was named Leonora, and after having lost sight of her for years, the hero discovered her again as a great actress in a great play. (Miss Ellen Terry in *Faust* had passed disturbingly athwart my existence). I remember no more. The story was refused. But I firmly believe that for a boy of nineteen it was something of an achievement. No one saw it except myself and the local editor; it was a secret, and now it is a lost secret. Soon afterwards another local newspaper advertised for a short serial of local interest. Immediately I wrote the serial, again without difficulty. It was a sinister narrative to illustrate the evils of marrying a drunken woman. (I think I had just read *L’Assommoir* in Vizetelly’s original edition of Zola). There was a street in our town named Commercial Street. I laid the scene there, and called it Speculation Street. I know not what satiric criticism of modern life was involved in that change of name. This serial too was refused; I suspect that it was entirely without serial interest.

I had matriculated at London University three years before, and was then working, without heart, for a law degree (which I never won); instead of Ouida my nights were given to Austin's *Jurisprudence*, the *Institutes* of Justinian and of Gaius, and Maine's *Ancient Law*; the last is a great and simple book, but it cannot be absorbed and digested while the student is preoccupied with the art of fiction. Out of an unwilling respect for the University of London, that august negation of the very idea of a University, I abandoned literature. As to watercolors, my tubes had dried up long since; and house-decoration was at a standstill.

The editor of the second newspaper, after a considerable interval, wrote and asked me to call on him, for all the world as though I were the impossible hero of a journalistic novel. The interview between us was one of these plagiarisms of fiction which real life is sometimes guilty of. The editor informed me that he had read my sinister serial with deep interest, and felt convinced, his refusal of it notwithstanding, that I was marked out for the literary vocation. He offered me a post on his powerful organ as a regular weekly contributor, without salary. He said that he was sure I could write the sort of stuff he wanted, and I entirely agreed with him. My serene confidence in my ability, pen in hand, to do anything that I wished to do, was thus manifest in the beginning. Glory shone around as I left the editorial office. The romantic quality of this episode is somewhat impaired by the fact, which I shall nevertheless mention, that the editor was a friend of the family, and that my father was one of several optimistic persons who were dropping money on the powerful organ every week. The interview, however, was indeed that peculiar phenomenon (so well known to all readers of biography) styled the "turning-point in one's career." But I lacked the wit to perceive this for several years.

The esteemed newspaper to which I was now attached served several fairly large municipalities which lay so close together as to form in reality one very large town divided against itself. Each willful cell in this organism was represented by its own special correspondent on the newspaper, and I was to be the correspondent for my native town. I had nothing to do with the news department; menial reporters attended to that. My task was to comment weekly upon the town's affairs to the extent of half a column of paragraphic notes.

"Whatever you do, you must make your pars, bright," said the editor, and he repeated the word—"Bright!"

Now I was entirely ignorant of my town's affairs. I had no suspicion of the incessant comedy of municipal life. For two days I traversed our stately thoroughfares in search of material, wondering what, in the names of Horace Greeley, James Gordon Bennett, and Mr. Delane, my first to the devil, its natural home. Then I happened to think of tramlines. The tramlines, under the blessing of Heaven, were badly laid, and constituted a menace to all wheeled traffic save trams; also the steam-engines of the trams were offensive. I wrote sundry paragraphs on that topic, and having thus acquired momentum, I arrived safely at the end of my half column by the aid of one or two minor trifles.

In due course I called at the office to correct proof, and I was put into the hands of the subeditor. It was one of those quarters-of-an-hour that make life worth living; for the sub-editor appreciated me; nay, he regarded me as something of a journalistic prodigy, and his adjectives as he ran through the proof were extremely agreeable. Presently he came to a sentence in which I had said that such-and-such a proceeding "smacked of red tape".

"*Smacked of red tape*?" He looked up at me doubtfully. "Rather a mixed metaphor, isn't it?"

I didn't in the least know what he meant, but I knew that that sentence was my particular pet. "Not at all!" I answered with feeling. "Nothing of the sort! It *does* smack of red tape—you must admit that."

And the sentence stood. I had awed the sub-editor.

My notes enjoyed a striking success. Their brightness scintillated beyond the brightness of the comments from any other town. People wondered who this caustic, cynical, and witty anonymous wag was. I myself was vastly well satisfied; I read the stuff over and over again; but at the same time I perceived that I could make my next contribution infinitely more brilliant. And I did. I mention this matter, less because it was my first appearance in print, than because it first disclosed to me the relation between literature and life. In writing my stories I had never thought for a moment of life. I had *made* something, according to a model, not dreaming that fiction was supposed to reflect real life. I had regarded fiction as—fiction, a concoction on the plane of the Grand Canal, or the Zocodover at Toledo. But in this other literature I was obliged to begin with life itself. The wheel of a dog-cart spinning off as it jammed against a projecting bit of tram-line; a cyclist overset: what was there in that? Nothing. Yet I had taken that nothing and transformed it into something—something that seemed important, permanent, *literary*. I did not comprehend the process, but I saw its result. I do not comprehend it now. The man who could explain it could answer the oft-repeated cry: What is Art?

Soon afterwards I had a delightful illustration of the power of the press. That was the era of coffee-houses, when many excellent persons without too much humor tried all over the country to wean the populace from beer by the superior attractions of coffee and cocoa; possibly they had never tasted beer. Every town had its coffee-house company, limited. Our coffee-house happened to be a pretty bad one, while the coffee-house of the next town was conspicuously good. I said so in print, with my usual display of verbal pyrotechny. The paper had not been published an hour before the aggrieved manager of our coffee-house had seen his directors on the subject. He said I lied, that I was unpatriotic, and that he wanted my head on a charger; or words to that effect. He asked my father, who was a director of both newspaper and coffee-house, whether he could throw any light on the identity of the scurrilous and cowardly scribe, and my father, to his eternal credit, said that he could not. Again I lived vividly and fully. As for our coffee-house, it mended its ways.

The County Council Bill had just become law, and our town enjoyed the diversions of electing its first County Councilor. The rival candidates were a brewer and a prominent lay religionist. My paper supported the latter, and referred to the conflict between the forces of civilization and the forces of barbarism. It had a magnificent heading across two columns: “Brains *versus* Beer”, and expressed the most serene confidence as to the result. Of course, my weekly notes during the campaign were a shield and a buckler to the religionist, who moreover lived next door.

The result of the poll was to be announced late on the night before the paper went to press. The editor gave me instructions that *if* we lost, I was to make fun of the brewer, and in any case to deliver my copy by eleven o’clock next morning. We lost heavily, disastrously; the forces of civilization were simply nowhere. I attended the declaration of the poll, and as the elated brewer made his speech of ceremony in front of the town hall, I observed that his hat was stove-in and askew. I fastened on that detail, and went to bed in meditation upon the facetious notes, which I was to write early on the morrow. In the middle of the night I was wakened up. My venerable grandfather, who lived at the other end of the town, had been taken suddenly ill and was dying. As his eldest grandson, my presence at the final scene was indispensable. I went, and talked in low tones with my elders. Upstairs the old man was fighting for every breath. The doctor descended at intervals and said that it was only a question of hours. I was absolutely obsessed by a delicious feeling of the tyranny of the press. Nothing domestic could be permitted to interfere with my duty as a journalist.

"I must write those facetious comments while my grandfather is dying upstairs!" This thought filled my brain. It seemed to me to be fine, splendid. I was intensely proud of being laid under a compulsion so startlingly dramatic. Could I manufacture jokes while my grandfather expired? Certainly: I was a journalist. And never since have I been more ardently a journalist than I was that night and morning. With a strong sense of the theatrical, I wrote my notes at dawn. They delicately excoriated the brewer.

The curious thing is that my grandfather survived not only that, but several other fatal attacks.

A few weeks later, my newspaper was staggering under the blow of my migration to London.

CHAPTER 4

“Life plagiarized art”

I came to London at the age of twenty-one, with no definite ambition, and no immediate object save to escape from an intellectual and artistic environment which had long been excessively irksome to me. Some achievement of literature certainly lay in the abyss of my desires, but I allowed it to remain there, vague and almost unnoticed. As for provincial journalism, without meed in coin, it had already lost the charm of novelty, and I had been doing it in a perfunctory manner. I made no attempt to storm Fleet Street. The fact is that I was too much engaged in making a meal off London, swallowing it, to attend to anything else; this repast continued for over two years. I earned a scanty living as shorthand clerk, at first, in a solicitor's office; but a natural gift for the preparation of bills of costs for taxation, that highly delicate and complicated craft, and an equally natural gift for advancing my own interests, soon put me in receipt of an income that many "admitted" clerks would have envied: to be exact and prosaic, two hundred a year. Another clerk in the office happened to be an ardent bibliophile. We became friends, and I owe him much. He could chatter in idiomatic French like a house on fire, and he knew the British Museum Reading Room from its centre to its periphery. He first taught me to regard a book, not as an instrument for obtaining information or emotion, but as a *book*, printed at such a place in such a year by so-and-so, bound by so-and-so, and carrying colophons, registers, water-marks, and *fautes d'impression*. He was acquainted, I think, with every second-hand bookstall in the metropolis; and on Saturday afternoons we visited most of them. We lived for bargains and rarities. We made it a point of honor to buy one book every day, and when bargains failed we used to send out the messengers for a Camelot Classic or so—ninepence net; this series was just then at the height of its vogue. We were for ever bringing into the office formidable tomes—the choice productions of the presses of Robert and Henry Stephen, Elzevir, Baskerville, Giunta, Foulis, and heaven knows whom. My discovery of the Greek *editio princeps* of Plutarch, printed by Philip Giunta at Florence in 1517, which I bought in White-chapel for two shillings, nearly placed me on a level with my preceptor. We decidedly created a sensation in the office. The "admitted" clerks and the articled clerks, whom legal etiquette forbids as a rule to fraternize with the "unadmitted", took a naive and unaffected pleasure in our society. One day I was examining five enormous folios full-bound in yellow calf, in the clients' waiting-room, when the senior partner surprised me thus wasting the firm's time.

"What's all this?" he inquired politely. He was far too polite to remonstrate.

"This, sir? Bayle's *Dictionaire Historique et Critique*," I replied.

"Is it yours?"

"Yes, sir. I bought it in the lunch-hour at Hodgson's."

"Ah!"

He retired abashed. He was a gentle fellow, and professed an admiration for Browning; but the chief thing of which he had the right to be proud was his absolutely beautiful French accent.

I had scarcely been in London a year when my friend and I decided to collaborate in a bibliographical dictionary of rare and expensive books in all European languages. Such a scheme sounds farcical, but we were perfectly serious over it; and the proof of our seriousness is that we worked at it every morning before breakfast. I may mention also that we lunched daily at the British Museum, much to the detriment of our official duties. For months we must have been quite mad—obsessed. We got about as far as the New English Dictionary travelled in the first twenty years of its life, that is to say, twothirds through "A"; and then suddenly, irrationally, without warning, we dropped it. The mere conception of this dictionary was so splendid that there was a grandeur even in dropping it.

Soon after this, the managing clerk of the office, a university man, autocratic, but kindly and sagacious, bought a country practice and left us. He called me into his room to say good-bye.

"You'd no business to be here," he said, sharply. "You ought to be doing something else. If I find you here when I visit town next, I shall look on you as a deviled fool. Don't forget what I say."

I did not. On the contrary, his curt speech made a profound impression on me. He was thirty, and a man of the world; I was scarcely twenty-three. My self-esteem, always vigorous, was flattered into all sorts of new developments. I gradually perceived that, quite without intending it, I had acquired a reputation. As what? Well, as a learned youth not lacking in brilliance. And this reputation had, I am convinced, sprung solely from the habit of buying books printed mainly in languages which neither myself nor my acquaintances could read. I owned hundreds of books, but I seldom read any of them, except the bibliographical manuals; I had no leisure to read. I scanned. I can only remember, in this period, that I really studied one book—Plato's *Republic*, which I read because I thought I was doing the correct thing. Beyond this, and a working knowledge of French, and an entirely sterile apparatus of bibliographical technique, I had mastered nothing. Three qualities I did possess, and on these three qualities I have traded ever since. First, an omnivorous and tenacious memory (now, alas, effete!)—the kind of memory that remembers how much London spends per day in cab fares just as easily as the order of Shakespeare's plays or the stock anecdotes of Shelley and Byron. Second, a naturally sound taste in literature. And third, the invaluable, despicable, disingenuous journalistic faculty of seeming to know much more than one does know. None knew better than I that, in any exact, scholarly sense, I knew nothing of literature. Nevertheless, I should have been singularly blind not to see that I knew far more about literature than nine-tenths of the people around me. These people pronounced me an authority, and I speedily accepted myself as an authority: were not my shelves a silent demonstration? By insensible degrees I began to assume the pose of an authority. I have carried that pose into newspaper offices and the very arcana of literary culture, and never yet met with a disaster. Yet in the whole of my life I have not devoted one day to the systematic study of literature. In truth, it is absurdly easy to impress even persons who in the customary meaning of the term have the right to call themselves well-educated. I remember feeling very shy one night in a drawing-room rather new to me. My host had just returned from Venice, and was describing the palace where Browning lived; but he could not remember the name of it.

"Rezzonico," I said at once, and I chanced to intercept the look of astonishment that passed between host and hostess.

I frequented that drawing-room a great deal afterwards, and was always expected to speak *ex cathedra* on English literature.

London the entity was at least as good as my dreams of it, but the general mass of the persons composing it, considered individually, were a sad disappointment. “What duffers!” I said to myself again and again. “What duffers!” I had come prepared to sit provincially at the feet of these Londoners! I was humble enough when I arrived, but they soon cured me of that—they were so ready to be impressed! What struck me was the extraordinary rarity of the men who really could “do their job”. And when I found them, they were invariably provincials like me who had come up with the same illusions and suffered the same enlightenment. All who were successfully performing that feat known as “getting on” were provincials. I enrolled myself in their ranks. I said that I would get on. The “deviled fool” phrase of the Chancery clerk rang in my ears like a bugle to march.

And for about a year I didn’t move a step. I read more than I have ever read before or since. But I did nothing. I made no effort, nor did I subject myself to any mental discipline. I simply gorged on English and French literature for the amusement I could extract from such gluttony, and found physical exercise in becoming the champion of an excessively suburban lawn-tennis club. I wasted a year in contemplating the magnificence of my future doings. Happily I never spoke these dreams aloud! They were only the private solace of my idleness. Now it was that I at last decided upon the vocation of letters; not scholarship, not the dilettantism of belles-lettres, but sheer constructive journalism and possibly fiction. London, however, is chiefly populated by grey-haired men who for twenty years have been about to become journalists and authors. And but for a fortunate incident—the thumb of my Fate has always been turned up—I might ere this have fallen back into that tragic rear-guard of Irresolutes.

Through the good offices of my appreciative friends who had forgotten the name of the Palazzo Rezzonico, I was enabled to take up my quarters in the abode of some artists at Chelsea. I began to revolve, dazzled, in a circle of painters and musicians who, without the least affectation, spelled Art with the majuscule; indeed, it never occurred to them that people existed who would spell it otherwise. I was compelled to set to work on the reconstruction of nearly all my ideals. I had lived in a world where beauty was not mentioned, seldom thought of. I believe I had scarcely heard the adjective "beautiful" applied to anything whatever, save confections like Gounod's "There is a Green Hill Far Away". Modern oak sideboards were called handsome, and Christmas cards were called pretty; and that was about all. But now I found myself among souls that talked of beauty openly and unashamed. On the day that I arrived at the house in Chelsea, the drawing-room had just been papered, and the pattern of the frieze resembled nothing in my experience. I looked at it.

"Don't you think our frieze is charming?" the artist said, his eyes glistening.

It was the man's obvious sincerity that astounded me. O muse of mahogany and green rep! Here was a creature who took a serious interest in the pattern of his wall-papers! I expressed my enthusiasm for the frieze.

"Yes," he replied, with simple solemnity, "*it is very beautiful*."

This worship of beauty was continuous. The very teaspoons were banned or blessed on their curves, and as for my rare editions, they wilted under tests to which they were wholly unaccustomed. I possessed a *rarissime* illustrated copy of *Manon Lescaut*, of which I was very proud, and I showed it with pride to the artist. He remarked that it was one of the ugliest books he had ever seen.

"But," I cried, "you've no idea how scarce it is! It's worth—"

He laughed.

I perceived that I must begin life again, and I began it again, sustained in my first efforts by the all-pervading atmosphere of ardor. My new intimates were not only keenly appreciative of beauty, they were bent on creating it. They dreamed of great art-works, lovely compositions, impassioned song. Music and painting they were familiar with, and from me they were serenely sure of literature. The glorious accent with which they clothed that word—literature! Aware beforehand of my authority, my enthusiasm, they accepted me with quick, warm sympathy as a fellow-idealist. Then they desired to know what I was engaged upon, what my aims were, and other facts exceedingly difficult to furnish.

It happened that the most popular of all popular weeklies had recently given a prize of a thousand pounds for a sensational serial. When the serial had run its course, the editor offered another prize of twenty guineas for the best humorous condensation of it in two thousand words. I thought I might try for that, but I feared that my friends would not consider it “art”. I was mistaken. They pointed out that caricature was a perfectly legitimate form of art, often leading to much original beauty, and they urged me to enter the lists. They read the novel in order the better to enjoy the caricature of it, and when, after six evenings’ labor, my work was done, they fiercely exulted in it. Out of the fullness of technical ignorance they predicted with certainty that I should win the prize.

Here again life plagiarized the sentimental novel, for I did win the guineas. My friends were delighted, but they declined to admit a particle of surprise. Their belief in what I could do kept me awake at nights.

This was my first pen-money, earned within two months of my change of air. I felt that the omen was favorable.

CHAPTER 5

"I will write a novel"

NOW I come to the humiliating part of my literary career, the period of what in Fleet Street is called "free-lancing". I use the term "humiliating" deliberately. A false aureole of romance encircles the head of that miserable opportunist, the free-lance. I remember I tried to feel what a glorious thing it was to be a free-lance, dependent on none (but dependent on all), relying always on one's own invention and ingenuity, poised always to seize the psychological moment, and gambling for success with the calm (so spurious) of a dicer in the eighteenth century.

Sometimes I deceived myself into complacency, but far more often I realized the true nature of the enterprise and set my teeth to endure the spiritual shame of it. The free-lance is a tramp touting for odd jobs; a peddler crying stuff which is bought usually in default of better; a producer endeavoring to supply a market of whose conditions he is in ignorance more or less complete; a commercial traveler liable constantly to the insolence of an elegant West End draper's "buyer". His attitude is in essence a fawning attitude; it must be so; he is the poor relation, the doff-hat, the ready-for-anything. He picks up the crumbs that fall from the table of the "staff"—the salaried, jealous, intriguing staff—or he sits down, honored, when the staff has finished. He never goes to bed; he dares hot; if he did, a crumb would fall. His experience is as degrading as a competitive examination, and only less degrading than that of the black-and-white artist who trudges Fleet Street with a portfolio under his arm. And the shame of the free-lance is none the less real because he alone witnesses it—he and the postman, that postman with elongated missive, that herald of ignominy, that dismaying process-server, who raps the rap of apprehension and probable doom six, eight, and even twelve times per diem!

The popular paper that had paid me twenty guineas for being facetious expressed a polite willingness to consider my articles, and I began to turn the life of a law-office into literature; my provincial experience had taught me the trick. Here was I engaged all day in drawing up bills of costs that would impose on a taxing-master to the very last three-and-fourpence; and there was the public in whose chaotic mind a lawyer's bill existed as a sort of legend, hieroglyphic and undecipherable. What more natural than a brief article—"How a bill of costs is drawn up," a trifling essay of three hundred words over which I labored for a couple of evenings? It was accepted, printed, and with a postal order for ten shillings on the ensuing Thursday I saw the world opening before me like a flower. The pathos of my sanguine ignorance! I followed up this startling success with a careful imitation of it—"How a case is prepared for trial," and that too brought its ten shillings. But the vein suddenly ceased. My fledgling fancy could do no more with law, and I cast about in futile blindness for other subjects. I grew conscious for the first time of my lack of technical skill. My facility seemed to leave me, and my self-confidence. Every night I labored dully and obstinately, excogitating, inventing, grinding out, bent always to the squalid and bizarre tastes of the million, and ever striving after "catchiness" and "actuality". My soul, in the arrogance of a certain achievement, glances back furtively, with loathing, at that period of emotional and intellectual dishonor. The one bright aspect of it is that I wrote everything with a nice regard for English; I would lavish a night on a few paragraphs; and years of this penal servitude left me with a dexterity in the handling of sentences that still surprises the possessor of it. I have heard of Fleet Street hacks who regularly produce sixty thousand words a week; but I well know that there are not many men who can come fresh to a pile of new books, tear the entrails out of them, and write a fifteen-hundred-word *causerie* on them, passably stylistic, all inside sixty minutes. This means skill, and I am proud of it. But my confessions as a reviewer will come later.

No! Free-lancing was not precisely a triumph for me. Call it my *Purgatorio*. I shone some- times with a feeble flicker, in half-crown paragraphs, and in jumpy articles under alliterative titles that now and then flared on a pink or yellow contents-bill. But I can state with some certainty that my earnings in the mass did not exceed three pence an hour. During all this time I was continually spurred by the artists around me, who naively believed in me, and who were cognizant only of my successes. I never spoke of defeat; I used to retire to my room with rejected stuff as impassive as a wounded Indian; while opening envelopes at breakfast I had the most perfect command of my features. Mere vanity always did and always will prevent me from acknowledging a reverse at the moment; not till I have retrieved my position can I refer to a discomfiture. Consequently, my small world regarded me as much more successful than I really was. Had I to live again, which Apollo forbid, I would pursue the same policy.

During all this time, too, I was absorbing

French fiction incessantly; in French fiction I include the work of Turgenev, because I read him always in French translations. Turgenev, the brothers de Goncourt, and de Maupassant were my gods. I accepted their canons, and they filled me with a general scorn of English fiction which I have never quite lost. From the composition of *Bits* articles I turned to admire *Fathers and Children* or *Une Vie*, and the violence of the contrast never struck me at the time. I did not regard myself as an artist, or as emotional by temperament. My ambition was to be a journalist merely—cool, smart, ingenious, equal to every emergency. I prided myself on my impassivity. I was acquainted with men who wept at fine music—I felt sure that Saint Cecilia and the heavenly choir could not draw a single tear from *my* journalistic eye. I failed to perceive that my appreciation of French fiction, and the harangues on fiction which I delivered to my intimates, were essentially emotional in character, and I forgot that the sight of a successful dramatist before the curtain on a first-night always caused me to shake with a mysterious and profound agitation. I mention these facts to show how I misunderstood, or ignored, the progress of my spiritual development. A crisis was at hand. I suffered from insomnia and other intellectual complaints, and went to consult a physician who was also a friend,

"You know," he said, in the course of talk, "you are one of the most highly-strung men I have ever met."

When I had recovered from my stupefaction, I glowed with pride. What a fine thing to be highly-strung, nervously organized! I saw myself in a new light; I thought better of myself; I rather looked down on cool, ingenious journalists. Perhaps I dimly suspected that Fleet Street was not to be the end of all things for me. It was soon afterwards that the artists whom I had twitted about their temperament accused me of sharing it with them to the full. Another surprise! I was in a state of ferment then. But I had acquired such a momentum in the composition of articles destined to rejection that I continued throughout this crisis to produce them with a regularity almost stupid. My friends began to inquire into the nature of my ultimate purpose. They spoke of a large work, and I replied that I had no spare time. None could question my industry. “Why don’t you write a novel on Sundays?” one of them suggested.

The idea was grandiose. To conceive such an idea was a proof of imagination. And the air with which these enthusiasts said these things was entirely splendid and magnificent. But I was just then firmly convinced that I had no vocation for the novel; I had no trace of a desire to emulate Turgenev. Again and again my fine enthusiasts returned to the charge, urged on by I know not what instinct. At last, to please them, to quiet them, I promised to try to write a short story. Without too much difficulty I concocted one concerning an artist’s model, and sent it to a weekly which gives a guinea each week for a prize story. My tale won the guinea.

“There! We told you so!” was the chorus. And I stood convicted of underestimating my own powers; fault rare enough in my career!

However, I insisted that the story was despicably bad, a commercial product, and the reply was that I ought next to write one for art's sake. Instead, I wrote one for morality's sake. It was a story with a lofty purpose, dealing with the tragedy of a courtesan's life. (No, I had not then read "Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes"). A prominent philanthropist with a tendency to faddism, who for morality's sake was running a monthly magazine, was much impressed by my tale, and after some trouble—the contributors were supposed to contribute *con amore*—I got another guinea. This story only pleased me for a few weeks; its crudity was too glaring. But I continued to write short stories, and several of them appeared in halfpenny evening papers. Gaining in skill, I aimed political skits in narrative form at the more exclusive, the consciously superior, penny evening papers, and one or two of these hit the mark. I admired the stuff greatly. Lo, I had risen from a concocter of *Bits* articles to be the scorpion-sting of cabinet ministers! My self-confidence began to return.

Then, one day, one beneficent and adorable day, my brain was visited by a Plot. I had a prevision that I was about to write a truly excellent short story. I took incredible pains to be realistic, stylistic, and all the other *istics*, and the result amazed me. I knew that at last I had accomplished a good thing—I knew by the glow within me, the emotional fatigue, the vista of sweet labor behind me. What moved me to dispatch this jewel, this bit of caviar-to-the-general, to the editor of a popular weekly with a circulation of a quarter of a million, I cannot explain. But so I did. The editor returned it with a note to say that he liked the plot, but the style was below his standard. I laughed, and, more happily inspired, sent it to *The Yellow Book*, where it duly appeared. *The Yellow Book* was then in apogee. Several fiercely literary papers singled out my beautiful story for especial praise.

"By heaven!" I said, "I will write a novel." It was a tremendous resolution.

I saw that I could *write*.

CHAPTER 6

"I had been through the mill"

BUT before continuing the narration of my adventures in fiction, I must proceed a little further in the dusty tracks of journalism. When I had labored sordidly and for the most part ineffectively as a free-lance for two or three years, I became, with surprising suddenness, the assistant-editor of a ladies' paper. The cause of this splendid metamorphosis was sadly unromantic. I had not bombarded the paper, from the shelter of a pseudonym, with articles of unexampled brilliance. The editor had not invited his mysterious and talented contributor into the editorial sanctum, and there informed him that his exclusive services, at a generous salary, were deemed absolutely essential to the future welfare of the organ which he had hitherto assisted only on occasion. I had never written a line for the paper, nor for any ladies' paper. I obtained the situation by "influence", and that of the grossest kind. All that I personally did was to furnish a list of the newspapers and periodicals to which I had contributed, and some specimens of my printed work. These specimens proved rather more than satisfactory. The editor adored smartness; smartness was the "note" of his paper; and he discovered several varieties of smartness in my productions. At our first interview, and always afterwards, his attitude towards me was full of appreciation and kindness. The post was a good one, a hundred and fifty a year for one whole day and four half-days a week. Yet I was afraid to take it. I was afraid to exchange two hundred a year for a hundred and fifty and half my time, I who ardently wished to be a journalist and to have leisure for the imitation of our lady George Sand! In the end I was hustled into the situation. My cowardice was shameful; but in recording it I am not unconscious of the fact that truth makes for piquancy.

"I am sorry to say that I shall have to leave you at Christmas, sir."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the lawyer who admired Browning. "How is that?"

"I am going on to the staff of a paper."

Perhaps I have never felt prouder than when I uttered those words. My pride must have been disgusting. This was the last time I ever said "sir" to any man under the rank of a knight. The defection of a reliable clerk who combined cunning in the preparation of costs with a hundred and thirty words a minute at shorthand was decidedly a blow to my excellent employer; good costs clerks are rarer than true poets; but he suffered it with impassive stoicism; I liked him for that.

On a New Year's Day I strolled along Piccadilly to the first day's work on my paper. "My paper"—O the joyful sound! But the boats were burnt up; their ashes were even cool; and my mind, in the midst of all this bliss, was vexed by grave apprehensions. Suppose the paper to expire, as papers often did! I knew that the existence of this particular paper was precarious; its foundations were not fixed in the dark backward and abysm of time—it was two years old. Nevertheless, and indisputably and solely, I was at last a journalist, and entitled so to describe myself in parish registers, county court summonses, jury papers, and income-tax returns. In six months I might be a tramp sleeping in Trafalgar Square, but on that gorgeous day I was a journalist; nay, I was second in command over a cohort of women whose cleverness, I trusted, would be surpassed only by their charm.

The office was in the West End—index of smartness; one arrived at ten thirty or so, and ascended to the suite in a lift. One smoked cigars and cigarettes incessantly. There was no discipline, and no need of discipline, since the indoor staff consisted only of the editor, myself, and the editor's lady-secretary. The contrast between this and the exact ritual of a solicitor's office was marked and delightful. In an adjoining suite on the same floor an eminent actress resided, and an eminent actor strolled in to us, grandiosely, during the morning, accepted a cigar and offered a cigarette (according to his frugal custom), chatted grandiosely, and grandiosely departed. Parcels were constantly arriving—books, proofs, process-blocks, samples of soap and of corsets: this continuous procession of parcels impressed me as much as anything. From time to time well-dressed and alert women called, to correct proofs, to submit drawings, or to scatter excuses. This was "Evadne", who wrote about the toilet; that was "Angelique", who did the cookery; the other was "Enid", the well-known fashion artist. In each case I was of course introduced as the new assistant-editor; they were adorable, without exception. At one o'clock, having apparently done little but talk and smoke, we went out, the Editor and I, to lunch at the Cri.

"This," I said to myself quite privately, "this may be a novel by Balzac, but it is not my notion of journalism."

The doings of the afternoon, however, bore a closer resemblance to my notion of journalism. That day happened to be press-day, and I perceived that we gradually became very busy. Messenger-boys waited while I wrote paragraphs to accompany portraits, or while I regularized the syntax of a recipe for sole *à la Normande*, or while I ornamented two naked lines from *The Morning Post* with four lines of embroidery. The editor was enchanted with my social paragraphs; he said I was born to it, and perhaps I was. I innocently asked in what part of the paper they were to shine.

"Gwendolen's column," he replied.

"Who is Gwendolen?" I demanded. Weeks before, I had admired Gwendolen's breadth of view and worldly grasp of things, qualities rare in a woman.

"You are," he said, "and I am. It's only an office signature."

Now, that was what I called journalism. I had been taken in, but I was glad to have been taken in.

At four o'clock he began frantically to dictate the weekly London Letter which he contributed to an Indian newspaper; the copy caught the Indian mail at six. And this too was what I called journalism. I felt myself to be in my element; I lived. At an hour which I forget we departed together to the printers, and finished off. It was late when the paper "went down". The next morning the lady-secretary handed to me the first rough folded "pull" of the issue, and I gazed at it as a mother might gaze at her firstborn.

"But is this all?" ran my thoughts. The fact was, I had expected some process of initiation. I had looked on "journalism" as a sort of temple of mysteries into which, duly impressed, I should be ceremoniously guided. I was called assistant-editor for the sake of grandiloquence, but of course I knew I was chiefly a mere subeditor, and I had anticipated that the sub-editorial craft would be a complex technical business requiring long study and practice. On the contrary, there seemed to me to be almost nothing in its technique. The tricks of making-up, making-ready, measuring blocks, running-round, cutting, saving a line, and so on: my chief assumed in the main that I understood all these, and I certainly did grasp them instinctively; they appeared childishly simple. Years afterwards, a contributor confided to me that the editor had told her that he taught me nothing after the first day, and that I was a born journalist, I do not seriously think that I was a born journalist, and I mention this detail, not from any vain-glory over a trifle, but to show that the *arcana*, of journalism partake of the nature of an imposture. The same may be said of all professional *arcana*, even those of politics or of the swell-mob.

In a word, I was a journalist—but I felt just the same as before.

I vaguely indicated my feelings on this point to the chief.

"Ah!" he said. "But you know you'd been through the mill before you came here."

So I had been through the mill! Writing articles at night and getting them back the next morning but one, for a year or two—that was going through the mill! Let it be so, then. When other men envied my position, and expressed their opinion that I had "got on to a soft thing", I indicated that the present was the fruit of the past, and that I had been through the mill.

ARNOLD BENNETT

Journalism for women, by women under the direction of men, is an affair at once anxious, agreeable and delicate for the men who direct. It is a journalism by itself, apart from other journalisms. And it is the only journalism that I intimately know. The commercial side of it, the queer financial basis of it, have a peculiar interest, but my scheme does not by any means include the withdrawal of those curtains. I am concerned with letters, and letters, I fear, have little connection with women's journalism. I learnt nothing of letters in that office, save a few of the more obvious journalistic devices, but I learnt a good deal about frocks, household management, and the secret nature of women, especially the secret nature of women. As for frocks, I have sincerely tried to forget that branch of human knowledge; nevertheless the habit, acquired then, of glancing first at a woman's skirt and her shoes, has never left me. My apprenticeship to frocks was studded with embarrassing situations, of which I will mention only one. It turns upon some designs for a layette. A layette, perhaps I ought to explain, is an outfit for a new-born babe, and naturally it is prepared in advance of the stranger's arrival. Underneath a page of layette illustrations I once put the legend, correct in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand—but this was the thousandth—*Cut-to-measure patterns supplied*. The solecism stands to all eternity against me on the file of the paper; and the recollection of it, like the recollection of a *gaucherie*, is persistently haunting.

And here I shall quit for a time the feminine atmosphere, and the path which I began by calling dusty, but which is better called flowery. My activity in that path showed no further development until after I had written my first novel.

CHAPTER 7

"My novel …nothing but a parcel"

"BY heaven!" I said, "I will write a novel!"

And I sat down to my oaken bureau with the air of a man who has resolved to commit a stupendous crime. Perhaps indeed it was a crime, this my first serious challenge to a neglectful and careless world. At any rate it was meant to be the beginning of the end, the end being twofold—fame and a thousand a year. You must bear well in mind that I was by no means the ordinary person, and my novel was by no means to be the ordinary novel. In these cases the very essence of the situation is always that one is not ordinary. I had just discovered that I could write — and when I use the term “write” here, I use it in a special sense, to be appreciated only by those elect who can themselves “write”, and difficult of comprehension by all others. I had had a *conté*—exquisitely Gallic as to spirit and form—in *The Yellow Book*, and that *conté* had been lauded in *The South Audley Street Gazette* or some organ of destructive criticism. My friends believed in Art, themselves, and me. I believed in myself, Art, and them. Could any factor be lacking to render the scene sublime and historic?

So I sat down to write my first novel, under the sweet influences of the de Goncourts, Turgenev, Flaubert, and de Maupassant. It was to be entirely unlike all English novels except those of one author, whose name I shall not mention now, for the reason that I have afore-time made my admiration of that author very public. I clearly remember that the purpose uppermost in my mind was to imitate what I may call the physical characteristics of French novels. There were to be no poetical quotations in my novel, no titles to the chapters; the narrative was to be divided irregularly into sections by Roman numerals only; and it was indispensable that a certain proportion of these sections should begin or end abruptly. As thus, for a beginning:—"Gerald suddenly changed the conversation, and taking the final match from his matchbox at last agreed to light a cigar." And for an ending:—"Her tremulous eyes sought his; breathing a sigh she murmured..." O succession of dots, charged with significance vague but tremendous, there were to be hundreds of you in my novel, because you play so important a part in the literature of the country of Victor Hugo and M. Loubet! So much for the physical characteristics. To come nearer to the soul of it, my novel was to be a mosaic consisting exclusively of Flaubert's *mots justes*—it was to be *mots justes* composed into the famous écriture artiste of the de Goncourts. The sentences were to perform the trick of "the rise and fall". The adjectives were to have color, the verbs were to have color, and perhaps it was a *sine qua non* that even the pronouns should be prismatic—I forget. And all these effects were to be obtained without the most trifling sacrifice of truth. There was to be no bowing in the house of the Rimmon of sentimentality. Life being grey, sinister, and melancholy, my novel must be grey, sinister, and melancholy. As a matter of strict fact, life deserved none of these epithets; I was having a very good time; but at twenty-seven one is captious, and liable to err in judgment—a liability which fortunately disappears at thirty-five or so. No startling events were to occur in my novel, nor anything out of the way that might bring the blush of shame to the modesty of nature; no ingenious combinations, no dramatic surprises, and above all no coincidences. It was to be the Usual miraculously transformed by Art into the Sublime.

The sole liberty that I might permit myself in handling the Usual was to give it a rhythmic contour—a precious distinction in those Yellerbocky days.

All these cardinal points being settled, I passed to the business of choosing a subject. Need I say that I chose myself? But, in obedience to my philosophy, I made myself a failure. I regarded my hero with an air of "There, but for the grace of God, goes me!” I decided that he should go through most of my own experiences, but that instead of fame and a thousand a year he should arrive ultimately at disillusion and a desolating suburban domesticity. I said I would call my novel *In the Shadow*, a title suggested to me by the motto of Balzac’s *Country Doctor*—“For a wounded heart, shadow and silence.” It was to be all very dolorous, this *Odyssey* of a London clerk who—But I must not disclose any detail of the plot.

So I sat down, and wrote on a fair quarto sheet, *In the Shadow*, and under that, “I”. It was a religious rite, an august and imposing ceremonial; and I was the officiating priest. In the few fleeting instants between the tracing of the “I” and the tracing of the first word of the narrative, I felt happy and proud; but immediately the fundamental brain-work began, I lost nearly all my confidence. With every stroke the illusion grew thinner, more remote. I perceived that I could not become Flaubert by taking thought, and this rather obvious truth rushed over me as a surprise. I knew what I wanted to do, and I could not do it. I felt, but I could not express.

My sentences would persist in being damnably Mudiesque. The *mots justes* hid themselves exasperatingly behind a cloud. The successions of dots looked merely fatuous. The charm, the poetry, the distinction, the inevitableness, the originality, the force, and the invaluable rhythmic contour—these were anywhere save on my page. All writers are familiar with the dreadful despair that ensues when a composition, on perusal, obstinately presents itself as a series of little systems of words joined by conjunctions and so forth, something like this—subject, predicate, object, *but*, subject, predicate, object. Pronoun, *however*, predicate, negative, infinitive verb. *Nevertheless* participle, accusative, subject, predicate, etc., etc., etc., for evermore. I suffered that despair. The proper remedy is to go to the nearest bar and have a drink, or to read a bit of *Comus* or *Urn-Burial*, but at that time I had no skill in weathering anti-cyclones, and I drove forward like a sinking steamer in a heavy sea.

And this was what it was, in serious earnest, to be an author! For I reckon that in writing the first chapter of my naturalistic novel, I formally became an author; I had undergone a certain apprenticeship. I didn't feel like an author, no more than I had felt like a journalist on a similar occasion. Indeed, far less: I felt like a fool, an incompetent ass. I seemed to have an idea that there was no such thing as literature, that literature was a mirage, or an effect of hypnotism, or a concerted fraud. After all, I thought, what in the name of common sense is the use of telling this silly ordinary story of everyday life? Where is the point? What is art, anyway, and all this chatter about truth to life, and all this rigmarole of canons?

I finished the chapter that night, hurriedly, perfunctorily, and only because I had sworn to finish it. Then, in obedience to an instinct which all Grub Street has felt, I picked out the correct *Yellow Book* from a shelf and read my beautiful story again. That enheartened me a little, restored my faith in the existence of art, and suggested the comfortable belief that things were not perhaps as bad as they seemed.

"Well, how's the novel getting on?" my friend the wall-paper enthusiast inquired jovially at supper.

"Oh, fine!" I said. "It's going to be immense."

Why one should utter these frightful and senseless lies, I cannot guess. I might just as well have spoken the precise truth to him, for his was a soul designed by providence for the encouragement of others. Still, having made that remark, I added in my private ear that either the novel must be immense or I must perish in the attempt to make it so.

In six months I had written only about thirty thousand words, and I felt the sort of elation that probably succeeds six months on a treadmill. But one evening, in the midst of a chapter, a sudden and mysterious satisfaction began to warm my inmost being, I knew that that chapter was good and going to be good. I experienced happiness in the very act of work. Emotion and technique were reconciled. It was as if I had surprisingly come upon the chart with the blood-red cross showing where the Spanish treasure was buried. I dropped my pen, and went out for a walk, and decided to give the book an entirely fresh start. I carefully read through all that I had written. It was bad, but viewed in the mass it produced on me a sort of culminating effect which I had not anticipated. Conceive the poor Usual at the bottom of a flight of stairs, and the region of the Sublime at the top: it seemed to me that I had dragged the haggard thing halfway up, and that it lay there, inert but safe, awaiting my second effort. The next night I braced myself to this second effort, and I thought that I succeeded.

"We're doing the trick, Charlie," Edmund Kean whispered into the ear of his son during a poignant scene of "Brutus". And in the very crisis of my emotional chapters, while my hero was rushing fatally to the nether greyness of the suburbs and all the world was at its most sinister and most melancholy, I said to myself with glee: "We're doing the trick". My moods have always been a series of violent contrasts, and I was now just as uplifted as I had before been depressed. There were interludes of doubt and difficulty, but on the whole I was charmed with my novel. It would be a despicable affectation to disguise the fact that I deemed it a truly distinguished piece of literature, idiosyncratic, finely imaginative, and of rhythmic contour. As I approached the end, my self-esteem developed in a *crescendo*, I finished the tale, having sentenced my hero to a marriage infallibly disastrous, at three o'clock one morning. I had labored for twelve hours without intermission. It was great, this spell; it was histrionic. It was Dumas over again, and the roaring French forties.

Nevertheless, to myself I did not yet dare to call myself an artist. I lacked the courage to believe that I had the sacred fire, the inborn and not-to-be-acquired vision. It seemed impossible that this should be so. I have ridiculed the whole artist tribe, and, in the pursuit of my vocation, I shall doubtless ridicule them again; but never seriously. Nothing is more deeply rooted in me than my reverence for the artistic faculty. And whenever I say, "The man's an artist", I say it with an instinctive solemnity that so far as I am concerned ends all discussion. Dared I utter this great saying to my shaving-mirror? No, I repeat that I dared not. More than a year elapsed before the little incident described at the commencement of these memoirs provided me with the audacity to in- form the author of *In the Shadow* that he too belonged to the weird tribe of Benjamin.

When my novel had been typewritten and I read it in cold blood, I was absolutely unable to decide whether it was very good, good, medium, bad, or very bad. I could not criticize it. All I knew was that certain sentences, in the vein of the *écriture artiste*, persisted beautifully in my mind, like fine lines from a favorite poet. I loosed the brave poor thing into the world over a post-office counter. “What chance *has* it, in the fray?” I exclaimed. My novel had become nothing but a parcel. Thus it went in search of its fate.

I have described the composition of my first book in detail as realistic as I can make it, partly because a few years ago the leading novelists of the day seemed to enter into a conspiracy to sentimentalize the first-book episode in their brilliant careers.

CHAPTER 8

"I was an author"

"WILL you step this way?" said the publisher's manager, and after coasting by many shelves loaded with scores of copies of the same book laid flat in piles—to an author the most depressing sight in the world—I was ushered into the sanctum, the star-chamber, the den, the web of the spider.

I beheld the publisher, whose name is a household word wherever the English language is written for posterity. Even at that time his imprint flamed on the title-pages of one or two works of a deathless nature. My manuscript lay on an occasional table by his side, and I had the curious illusion that he was posing for his photograph with my manuscript. As I glanced at it I could not help thinking that its presence there bordered on the miraculous. I had parted with it at a post-office. It had been stamped, sorted, chucked into a van, whirled through the perilous traffic of London's centre, chucked out of a van, sorted again, and delivered with many other similar parcels at the publisher's. The publisher had said: "Send this to So-and-so to read". Then more perils by road and rail, more risks of extinction and disorientation. Then So-and-so, probably a curt man, with a palate cloyed by the sickliness of many manuscripts, and a short way with new authors, had read it or pretended to read it. Then finally the third ordeal of locomotion. And there it was, I saw it once more, safe!

We discussed the weather and new reputations. I was nervous, and I think the publisher was nervous, too. At length, in a manner mysterious and inexplicable, the talk shifted to my manuscript. The publisher permitted himself a few compliments of the guarded sort.

"But there's no money in it, you know," he said.

"I suppose not," I assented. ("You are an ass for assenting to that," I said to myself.)

"I invariably lose money over new authors," he remarked, as if I was to blame.

"You didn't lose much over Mrs.. —," I replied, naming one of his notorious successes.

"Oh, *well!*" he said, "of *course* —. But I didn't make so much as you think, perhaps. Publishing is a very funny business." And then he added: "Do you think your novel will succeed like Mrs.. —'s?"

I said that I hoped it would.

"I'll be perfectly frank with you," the publisher exclaimed, smiling beneficently. "My reader likes your book. I'll tell you what he says." He took a sheet of paper that lay on the top of the manuscript and read.

I was enchanted, spell-bound. The nameless literary adviser used phrases of which the following are specimens (I am recording with exactitude):

"Written with great knowledge and a good deal of insight". "Character delineated by a succession of rare and subtle touches". "Living, convincing". "Vigour and accuracy". "The style is good".

I had no idea that publishers' readers were capable of such laudation.

The publisher read on: "I do not think it likely to be a striking success!"

"Oh!" I murmured, shocked by this bluntness.

"There's no money in it," the publisher repeated, firmly. "First books are too risky... I should like to publish it."

"Well?" I said, and paused, I felt that he had withdrawn within himself in order to ponder upon the chances of this terrible risk. So as not to incommode him with my gaze, I examined the office, which resembled a small drawing-room rather than an office. I saw around me signed portraits of all the roaring lions on the sunny side of Grub Street.

"I'll publish it," said the publisher, and I believe he made an honest attempt not to look like a philanthropist; however, the attempt failed. "I'll publish it. But of course I can only give you a small royalty."

"What royalty?" I asked.

"Five percent. —on a three-and-six-penny book."

"Very well. Thank you!" I said.

"I'll give you fifteen percent, after the sale of five thousand copies," he added kindly.

O ironist!

I emerged from the web of the spider triumphant, an accepted author. Exactly ten days had elapsed since I had first parted with my manuscript. Once again life was plagiarizing fiction. I could not believe that this thing was true. I simply could not believe it. "Oh!" I reflected, incredulous, "Something's bound to happen. It can't really come off. The publisher might die, and then—"

Protected by heaven on account of his good deeds, the publisher felicitously survived; and after a delay of twelve months (twelve centuries—during which I imagined that the universe hung motionless and expectant in the void!) he accomplished his destiny by really and truly publishing my book.

The impossible had occurred. I was no longer a mere journalist; I was an author.

"After all, it's nothing!" I said, with that intense and unoriginal humanity which distinguishes all of us. And in a blinding flash I saw that an author was in essence the same thing as a grocer or a duke.

CHAPTER 9

"I got a new hat out of mine"

MY novel, under a new title, was published both in England and America. I actually collected forty-one reviews, of it, and there must have been many that escaped me. Of these forty-one, four were unfavorable, eleven mingled praise and blame in about equal proportions, and twenty-six were unmistakably favorable, a few of them being enthusiastic.

Yet I had practically no friends on the press. One friend I had, a man of power, and he reviewed my book with an appreciation far too kind; but his article came as a complete surprise to me. Another friend I had, sub-editor of a society weekly, and he asked me for a copy of my book so that he might "look after it" in the paper. Here is part of the result:

"He has all the young novelist's faults... These are glaring faults; for, given lack of interest, and unpleasant scenes, how can a book be expected to be popular?"

A third friend I had, who knew the chief fiction- reviewer on a great morning paper. He asked me for a special copy of my book, and quite on his own initiative, undertook to arrange the affair. Here is part of the result:

"There is not much to be said either for or against—by Mr. —"

I had no other friends on the press, or friends who had friends on the press.

I might easily butcher the reviews for your amusement, but this practice is becoming trite. I will quote a single sentence which pleased me as much as any:—"What our hero's fate was let those who care to know find out, but let us as- sure them that in its discovery they will read of London life and labor as it is, not as the bulk of romances paint it." All the principal organs were surprisingly appreciative. And the majority of the reviewers agreed that my knowledge of human nature was exceptionally good, that my style was exceptionally good, that I had in me the makings of a novelist, and that my present subject was weak. My subject was not weak; but let that pass. When I reflect how my book flouted the accepted canons of English fiction, and how many aspects of it must have annoyed nine reviewers out of ten, I am compelled to the conclusion that reviewers arc a very good-natured class of persons. I shall return to this interesting point later—after I have described how I became a reviewer myself. The fact to be asserted is that I, quite obscure and defenseless, was treated very well. I could afford to smile from a high latitude at the remark of *The New York Observer* that "the story and characters are commonplace in the extreme". I felt that I had not lived in vain, and that kindred spirits were abroad in the land.

My profits from this book with the exceptional style and the exceptional knowledge of human nature, exceeded the cost of having it typewritten by the sum of one sovereign. Nor was I, nor am I, disposed to grumble at this. Many a first book has cost its author a hundred pounds. I got a new hat out of mine.

What I did grumble at was the dishonor of the prophet in his own county. Here I must delicately recall that my novel was naturalistic, and that it described the career of a young man alone in London. It had no "realism" in the vulgar sense, as several critics admitted, but still it was desperately exact in places, and I never surrounded the head of a spade with the aureole of a sentimental implement. The organ of a great seaport remarked: "We do not consider the book a healthy one. We say no more." Now you must imagine this excessively modern novel put before a set of estimable people whose ideas on fiction had been formed under the influence of Dickens and Mrs.. Henry Wood, and who had never changed those ideas. Some of them, perhaps, had not read a novel for ten years before they read mine. The result was appalling, frightful, tragical. For months I hesitated to visit the town and which had the foresight to bear me, and which is going to be famous on that score. I was castigated in the local paper. My nearest and dearest played nervously with their bread when my novel was mentioned at dinner. A relative in a distant continent troubled himself to inform me that the book was fragmentary and absolutely worthless. The broader-minded merely wished that I had never written the book. The discreet received it in silence. One innocent person, for whom I have the warmest regard, thought that my novel might be a suitable birthday present for his adolescent son. By chance he perused the book himself on the birthday eve. I was told that neither on that night nor on the next did he get a wink of sleep. His adolescent son certainly never got my book.

Most authors, I have learnt on enquiry, have to suffer from this strange lack of appreciation in the very circle where appreciation should be kindest; if one fault isn't found, another is; but they draw a veil across that dark aspect of the bright auctorial career. I, however, am trying to do without veils, and hence I refer to the matter.

CHAPTER 10

"I taught journalism"

MY chief resigned his position on the paper with intent to enliven other spheres of activity. The news of his resignation was a blow to me. It often happens that when an editor walks out of an office in the exercise of free-will, the staff follows him under compulsion. In Fleet Street there is no security of tenure unless one is ingenious enough to be the proprietor of one's paper.

"I shall never get on with any one as I have got on with you," I said to the chief.

"You needn't," he answered. "I'm sure they'll have the sense to give you my place if you ask for it". "They" were a board of directors.

And they had the sense; they even had the sense not to wait until I asked. I have before remarked that the thumb of my Fate has always been turned up. Still on the glorious side of thirty, still young, enthusiastic, and a prey to delightful illusions, I suddenly found myself the editor of a London weekly paper. It was not a leading organ, but it was a London weekly paper, and it had pretensions; at least I had. My name was inscribed in various annuals of reference. I dined as an editor with other editors. I remember one day sitting down to table in a populous haunt of journalists with no less than four editors. "Three years ago", I said to myself, "I should have deemed this an impossible fairy tale". I know now that there are hundreds of persons in London and elsewhere who regard even editors with gentle and condescending toleration. One learns.

I needed a sub-editor, and my first act was to acquire one. I had the whole world of struggling lady-journalists to select from: to choose was an almost sublime function. For some months previously we had been receiving paragraphs and articles from an outside contributor whose *flair* in the discovery of subjects, whose direct simplicity of style and general tidiness of "copy", had always impressed me. I had never seen her, and I knew nothing about her; but I decided that, if she pleased, this lady should be my sub-editor. I wrote desiring her to call, and she called. Without much preface I offered her the situation; she accepted it.

"Who recommended me to you?" she asked.

"No one," I replied, in the rôle of Joseph Pulitzer; "I liked your stuff."

It was a romantic scene. I mention it because I derived a child-like enjoyment from that morning. Vanity was mixed up in it; but I argued—If you are an editor, be an editor imaginatively. I seemed to resemble Louis the Fifteenth beginning to reign after the death of the Regent, but with no troublesome Fleury in the background.

"Now," I cried, "up goes the circulation!"

But circulations are not to be bullied into ascension. They will only rise on the pinions of a carefully constructed policy. I thought I knew all about journalism for women, and I found that I knew scarcely the fringe of it. A man may be a sub-editor, or even an assistant-editor, for half a lifetime, and yet remain ignorant of the true significance of journalism. Those first months were months of experience in a very poignant sense. The proprietary desired certain modifications in the existing policy. O that mysterious "policy", which has to be created and built up out of articles, paragraphs, and pictures! That thrice-mysterious "public taste" which has to be aimed at in the dark and hit! I soon learnt the difference between legislature and executive. I could "execute" anything, from a eulogy of a philanthropic duchess to a Paris fashion letter. I could instruct a fashion-artist as though I knew what I was talking about. I could play Blucher at the Waterloo of the advertisement-manager, I could interview a beauty and make her say the things that a beauty must say in an interview. But to devise the contents of an issue, to plan them, to balance them; to sail with this wind and tack against that; to keep a sensitive cool finger on the faintly beating pulse of the terrible many-headed patron; to walk in a straight line through a forest black as midnight; to guess the riddle of the circulation-book week by week; to know by instinct why Smiths sent in a repeat-order, or why Simpkins' was ten quires less; to keep one eye on the majestic march of the world, and the other on the vagaries of a bazaar-reporter who has forgotten the law of libel: these things, and seventy-seven others, are the real journalism. It is these things that make editors sardonic, grey, unapproachable.

Unique among all suspenses is the suspense that occupies the editorial mind between the moment of finally going to press and the moment of examining the issue on the morning of publication. Errors, appalling and disastrous errors, will creep in; and they are irremediable then. These mishaps occur to the most exalted papers, to all papers, except perhaps the *Voce della Verita*, which, being the organ of the Pope, is presumably infallible. Tales circulate in Fleet Street that make the hair stand on end; and every editor says: "This might have happened to *me*." Subtle beyond all subtleties is the magic and sinister change that happens to your issue in the machine-room at the printers. You pass the final page and all seems fair, attractive, clever, well-designed... Ah! But what you see is not what is on the paper; it is the reflection of the bright image in your mind of what you intended! When the last thousand is printed and the parcels are in the vans, then you gaze at the unalterable thing, and you see it coldly as it actually is. You see not what you intended, but what you have accomplished. And the difference! It is like the chill, steely dawn after the vague poetry of a moonlit night.

There is no peace for an editor. He may act the farce of taking a holiday, but the worm of apprehension is always gnawing at the root of pleasure. I once put my organ to bed and went off by a late train in a perfect delirium of joyous anticipation of my holiday. I was recalled by a telegram that a fire with a strong sense of ironic humor had burnt the printing office to the ground and destroyed five-sixths of my entire issue. In such crises something has to be done, and done quickly. You cannot say to your public next week: "Kindly excuse the absence of the last number, as there was a fire at the printers". Your public recks not of fires, no more than the General Post Office, in its attitude towards late clerks, recognizes the existence of fogs in winter. And herein lies, for the true journalist, one of the principal charms of Fleet Street. Herein lies the reason why an editor's life is at once insufferable and worth living. There are no excuses. Every one knows that if the crater of Highgate Hill were to burst and bury London in lava tomorrow, the newspapers would show no trace of the disaster except an account of it. That thought is fine, heroic, when an editor thinks of it.

And if an editor knows not peace, he knows power. In Fleet Street, as in other streets, the population divides itself into those who want something and those who have something to bestow; those who are anxious to give a lunch, and those who deign occasionally to accept a lunch; those who have an axe to grind and those who possess the grindstone. The change from the one position to the other was for me at first rather disconcerting; I could not understand it; there was an apparent unreality about it; I thought I must be mistaken; I said to myself: “Surely this unusual ingratiating affability has nothing to do with the accident that I am an editor”. Then, like the rest of the owners of grindstones, I grew accustomed to the ownership, and cynical withal, cold, suspicious, and forbidding. I became bored by the excessive complaisance that had once tickled and flattered me. (Nevertheless, after I had ceased to be an editor I missed it; involuntarily I continued to expect it). The situation of the editor of a ladies’ paper is piquantly complicated, in this respect, by the fact that some women, not many—but a few, have an extraordinary belief in, and make unscrupulous use of, their feminine fascinations. The art of being “nice to editors “ is diligently practiced by these few; often, I know, with brilliant results. Sometimes I have sat in my office, with the charmer opposite, and sardonically reflected: “You think I am revolving round your little finger, madam, but you were never more mistaken in your life”. And yet, breathes there the man with soul so uniformly cold that once or twice in such circumstances the woman was not right after all? I cannot tell. The whole subject, the subject of that strange, disturbing, distracting, emotional atmosphere of femininity which surrounds the male in command of a group of more or less talented women, is of a supreme delicacy. It could only be treated safely in a novel—one of the novels which it is my fixed intention never to write. This I know and affirm, that the average woman-journalist is the most loyal, earnest, and teachable person under the sun. I begin to feel sentimental when I think of her astounding earnestness, even in grasping the live coal of English syntax. Syntax, bane of writing-women, I have spent scores of ineffectual hours in trying to inoculate the ungrammatical sex against your terrors! And how seriously they frowned, and how seriously I talked; and all the while the eternal mystery of the origin and destiny of all life lay thick and unnoticed about us!

These syntax-sittings led indirectly to a new development of my activities. One day a man called on me with a letter of introduction. He was a colonial of literary tastes. I asked in what manner I might serve him.

“I want to know whether you would care to teach me journalism,” he said.

“Teach you journalism!” I echoed, wondering by what unperceived alchemy I myself, but yesterday a tyro, had been metamorphosed into a professor of the most comprehensive of all crafts.

“I am told you are the best person to come to,” he said.

“Why not?” I thought. “Why shouldn’t I?” I have never refused work when the pay has been good. I named a fee that might have frightened him, but it did not. And so it fell out that I taught journalism to him, and to others, for a year or two. This vocation suited me; I had an aptitude for it; and my fame spread abroad. Some of the greatest experts in London complimented me on my methods and my results. Other and more ambitious schemes, however, induced me to abandon this lucrative field, which was threatening to grow tiresome.

CHAPTER 11

"At the hands of Critics"

I come now to a question only less delicate than that of the conflict of sexes in journalism—the question of reviewing, which, however, I shall treat with more freedom. If I have an aptitude for anything at all in letters, it is for criticism. Whenever I read a work of imagination, I am instantly filled with ideas concerning it; I form definite views about its merit or demerit, and having formed them, I hold those views with strong conviction. Denial of them rouses me; I must thump the table in support of them; I must compel people to believe that what I say is true; I cannot argue without getting serious in spite of myself. In literature, but in nothing else, I am a propagandist; I am not content to keep my opinion and let others keep theirs. To have a worthless book in my house (save in the way of business), to know that any friend of mine is enjoying it, actually distresses me. That book must go, the pretensions of that book must be exposed, if I am to enjoy peace of mind. Some may suspect that I am guilty here of the affectation of a pose. Really it is not so. I often say to myself, after the heat of an argument, a denunciation, or a defense: "What does it matter, fool? The great mundane movement will continue, the terrestrial ball will roll on." But will it? Something must matter, after all, or the mundane movement emphatically would not continue. And the triumph of a good book, and the ignominy of a bad book, matter to me.

The criticism of imaginative prose literature, which is my speciality, is an over-crowded and not very remunerative field of activity. Every intelligent mediocrity in Fleet Street thinks he can appraise a novel, and most of them, judging from the papers, seem to make the attempt. And so quite naturally the pay is as a rule contemptible. To enter this field, therefore, with the intention of tilling it to a profitable fiscal harvest is an enterprise in the nature of a forlorn hope. I undertook it in innocence and high spirits, from a profound instinct. I had something to say. Of late years I have come to the conclusion that the chief characteristic of all bad reviewing is the absence of genuine conviction, of a message, of a clear doctrine; the incompetent reviewer has to invent his opinions.

I succeeded at first by dint of ignoring one of the elementary laws of journalism, to-wit, that editors do not accept reviews from casual outsiders. I wrote a short review of a French work and sent it to *The Illustrated London News*, always distinguished for its sound literary criticism. Any expert would have told me that I was wasting labor and postage. Nevertheless the review was accepted, printed, and handsomely paid for. I then sent a review of a new edition of Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* to an evening paper, and this, too, achieved publicity. After that, for some months, I made no progress.

And then I had the chance of a literary *causerie* in a weekly paper: eight hundred words a week, thirty pounds a year. I wrote a sample article—and I well remember the incredible pains I took to show that Mrs.. Lynn Linton's *In Haste and at Leisure* was thoroughly bad—but my article was too *literary*. The editor with thirty pounds a year to spend on literary criticism went in search of a confection less austere than mine. But I was not balked for long. The literary column of my own paper (of which I was then only assistant-editor) was presented to me on my assurance that I could liven it up: seven hundred words a week, at twelve and six-pence. The stuff that I wrote was entirely unsuited to the taste of our public ; but it attracted attention from the seats of the mighty, and it also attracted—final triumph of the despised reviewer!—publishers' advertisements. I wrote this column every week for some years. And I got another one to do, by asking for it. Then I selected some of my best and wittiest reviews, and sent them to the editor of a well-known organ of culture with a note suggesting that my pen ought to add to the charms of his paper. An editor of sagacity and perspicacity, he admitted the soundness of my suggestion without cavil, and the result was mutually satisfactory. At the present time I am continually refusing critical work. I reckon that on an average I review a book and a fraction of a book every day of my life, Sundays included.

"Then," says the man in the street inevitably, "you must spend a very large part of each day in reading new books." Not so. I fit my reviewing into the odd unoccupied corners of my time, the main portions of which are given to the manufacture of novels, plays, short stories, and longer literary essays. I am an author of several sorts. I have various strings to my bow. And I know my business. I write half a million words a year. That is not excessive; but it is passable industry, and nowadays I make a point of not working too hard. The half million words contain one or two books, one or two plays, and numerous trifles not connected with literary criticism; only about a hundred and fifty thousand words are left for reviewing.

The sense of justice of the man in the street is revolted. “You do not read through all the books that you pretend to criticize?” he hints. I have never known a reviewer to answer this insinuation straightforwardly in print, but I will answer it: No, I do not.

And the man in the street says, shocked: “You are unjust.”

And I reply: “Not at all. I am merely an expert.”

The performances of the expert in any craft will surprise and amaze the inexpert. Come with me into my study and I will surprise and amaze you. Have I been handling novels for bread-and-cheese all these years and not learnt to judge them by any process quicker than that employed by you who merely pick up a novel for relaxation after dinner? Assuming that your taste is fairly sound, let us be confronted with the same new novel, and I will show you, though you are a quick reader, that I can anticipate your judgment of that novel by a minimum of fifty-five minutes. The title-page—that conjunction of the title, the name of the author, and the name of the publisher—speaks to me, telling me all sorts of things. The very chapter-headings deliver a message of style. The narrative everywhere discloses to me the merits and defects of the writer; no author ever lived who could write a page without giving himself away. The whole book, open it where I will, is murmurous with indications for me. In the case of nine books of ten, to read them through would be not a work of supererogation—it would be a sinful waste of time on the part of a professional reviewer. The majority of novels—and all these remarks apply only to novels—hold no surprise for the professional reviewer. He can foretell them as the nautical almanac foretells astronomical phenomena. The customary established popular author seldom or never deviates from his appointed track, and it is the customary established popular author upon whom chiefly the reviewer is a parasite. New authors occasionally cause the reviewer to hesitate in his swift verdicts, especially when the verdict is inclined to be favorable. Certain publishers (that is to say, their "readers") have a knack of acquiring new authors who can imitate real excellence in an astonishing manner. In some cases the reviewer must deliberately "get into" the book, in order not to be deceived by appearances, in order to decide positively whether the author has genuine imaginative power, and if so, whether that power is capable of a sustained effort. But these difficult instances are rare. There remains the work of the true artist, the work that the reviewer himself admires and enjoys: say one book in fifty, or one in a hundred. The reviewer reads that through.

Brief reflection will convince any one that it would be economically impossible for the reviewer to fulfill this extraordinary behest of the man of the street to read every book through. Take your London morning paper, and observe the column devoted to, fiction of the day. It comprises some fifteen hundred words, and the reviewer receives, if he is well paid, three guineas for it. Five novels are discussed. Those novels will amount to sixteen hundred pages of printed matter. Reading at the rate of eight words a second, the reviewer would accomplish two pages a minute, and sixteen hundred pages in thirteen hours and twenty minutes. Add an hour arid forty minutes for the composition; and we have fifteen hours, or two days' work. Do you imagine that the reviewer of a London morning paper is going to hire out his immortal soul, his experience, his mere skill, at the rate of thirty-one and sixpence per day on irregular jobs? Scarcely. He will earn his three guineas inside three hours, and it will be well and truly earned. As a journeyman author, with the ability and inclination to turn my pen in any direction at request, I long ago established a rule never to work for less than ten shillings an hour on piece-work. If an editor commissioned an article, he received from me as much fundamental brain-power and as much time as the article demanded—up to the limit of his pay in terms of hours at ten shillings apiece. But each year I raise my price per hour. Of course, when I am working on my own initiative, for the sole advancement of my artistic reputation, I ignore finance and think of glory alone. It cannot, however, be too clearly understood that the professional author, the man who depends entirely on his pen for the continuance of breath, and whose income is at the mercy of an illness or a headache, is eternally com-promising between glory and something more edible and warmer at nights. He labors in the first place for food shelter, tailors, a woman, European travel, horses, stalls at the opera, good cigars, ambrosial evenings in restaurants; and he gives glory the best chance he can. I am not speaking of geniuses with a mania for posterity; I am speaking of human beings.

To return and to conclude this chapter. I feel convinced—nay, I know—that on the whole novelists get a little more than justice at the hands of their critics. I can recall many instances in which my praise has, in the light of further consideration, exceeded the deserts of a book; but very, very few in which I have cast a slur on genuine merit. Critics usually display a tendency towards a too generous kindness, particularly Scottish reviewers; it is almost a rule of the vocation. Most authors, I think, recognize this pleasing fact. It is only the minority, rabid for everlasting laudation, who carp; and, carping, demand the scalps of multiple-reviewers as a terrible example and warning to the smaller fry.

CHAPTER 12

"It was, in a word, a boom"

SERIAL fiction is sold and bought just like any other fancy goods. It has its wholesale houses, its commercial travelers—even its trusts and "corners". An editor may for some reason desire the work of a particular author; he may dangle gold before that author or that author's agent; but if a corner has been established he will be met by polite regrets and the information that Mr. So-and-So, or the Such-and-Such Syndicate, is the proper quarter to apply to; then the editor is aware that he will get what he wants solely by one method of payment—

through the nose. A considerable part of the fiction business is in the hand of a few large syndicates—syndicates in name only, and middle-men in fact. They perform a useful function. They will sell to the editor the entire rights of a serial, or they will sell him the rights for a particular district—the London district, the Manchester district, the John-o'-Groats district—the price varying in direct ratio with the size of the district. Many London papers are content to buy the London rights only of a serial, or to buy the English rights as distinct from the Scottish rights, or to buy the entire rights minus the rights of one or two large provincial districts. Thus a serial may make its original appearance in London only; or it may appear simultaneously in London and Manchester only, or in London only in England and throughout Scotland, or in fifty places at once in England and Scotland. And after a serial has appeared for the first time and run its course, the weeklies of small and obscure towns, the proud organs of all the little Pedlingtons, buy for a trifle the right to reprint it. The serials of some authors survive in this manner for years in the remote provinces; pick up the local sheet in a country inn, and you may perhaps shudder again over the excitations of a serial that you read in book form in the far-off nineties. So, all editorial purses are suited, the syndicates reap much profit, and they are in a position to pay their authors, both tame and wild, a just emolument; upon occasion they can even be generous to the verge of an imprudence.

When I was an editor, I found it convenient, economical, and satisfactory to buy all my fiction from a large and powerful syndicate. I got important "names", the names that one sees on the title-pages of railway novels, at a moderate price, and it was nothing to me that my serial was appearing also in Killicrankie, the Knockmillydown Mountains, or the Scilly Isles. The representative of the syndicate, a man clothed with authority, called regularly; he displayed his dainty novelties, his leading lines, his old favorites, his rising stars, his dark horses, and his dead bargains; I turned them over, like a woman on remnant-day at a draper's; and after the inevitable Oriental chaffering, we came to terms. I bought Christmas stories in March, and seaside fiction in December, and good solid Baring-Gould or Le Queux or L. T. Meade all the year round.

Excellently as these ingenious narrative confections served their purpose, I dreamed of something better. And in my dream a sudden and beautiful thought accosted me: Why should all the buying be on one side?

And the next time the representative of the syndicate called upon me, I met his overtures with another.

"Why should all the buying be on one side?" I said. "You know I am an author." I added that if he had not seen any of my books, I must send him copies. They were exquisitely different from his wares, but I said nothing about that.

"Ah!" he parried firmly. "We never buy serials from editors."

I perceived that I was by no means the first astute editor who had tried to mingle one sort of business with another. Still it was plain to me that my good friend was finding it a little difficult to combine the affability of a seller with the lofty disinclination of one who is requested to buy in a crowded market.

"I should have thought," I remarked, with a diplomatic touch of annoyance, "that you would buy wherever you could get good stuff."

"Oh, yes," he said, "of course we do. But—"

"Well," I continued, "I am writing a serial, and I can tell you it will be a good one. I merely mention it to you. If you don't care for it, I fancy I can discover someone who will."

Then, having caused to float between us, cloud-like, the significance of the indisputable fact that there were other syndicates in the world, I proceeded nonchalantly to the matter of his visit and gave him a good order. He was an able merchant, but I had not moved in legal circles for nothing. Business is business: and he as well as I knew that arbitrary rules to the exclusion of editors must give way before this great and sublime truth, the foundation of England's glory.

The next thing was to concoct the serial. I had entered into a compact with myself that I would never "write down" to the public in a long fiction. I was almost bound to pander to the vulgar taste, or at any rate to a taste not refined, in my editing, in my articles, and in my short stories, but I had sworn solemnly that I would keep the novel-form unsullied for the pure exercise of the artist in me. What became of this high compact? I merely ignored it. I tore it up and it was forgotten, the instant I saw a chance of earning the money of shame. I devised excuses, of course. I said that my drawing-room wanted new furniture; I said that I might lift the sensational serial to a higher place, thus serving the cause of art; I said—I don't know what I said, all to my conscience. But I began the serial.

As an editor, I knew the qualities that a serial ought to possess. And I knew specially that what most serials lacked was a large, central, unifying, vivifying idea. I was very fortunate in lighting upon such an idea for my first serial. There are no original themes; probably no writer ever did invent an original theme; but my theme was a brilliant imposture of originality. It had, too, grandeur and passion, and fantasy, and it was inimical to none of the prejudices of the serial reader. In truth it was a theme worthy of much better treatment than I accorded to it. Throughout the composition of the tale, until nearly the end, I had the uneasy feeling, familiar to all writers, that I was frittering away a really good thing. But as the climax approached, the situation took hold of me, and in spite of myself I wrote my best. The tale was divided into twelve installments of five thousand words each, and I composed it in twenty-four half-days. Each morning, as I walked down the Thames Embankment, I contrived a chapter of two thousand five hundred words, and each afternoon I wrote the chapter. An instinctive sense of form helped me to plan the events into an imposing shape, and it needed no abnormal inventive faculty to provide a thrill for the conclusion of each section. Further, I was careful to begin the story on the first page, without preliminaries, and to finish it abruptly when it was finished. For the rest, I put in generous quantities of wealth, luxury, feminine beauty, surprise, catastrophe, and genial, incurable optimism. I was as satisfied with the result as I had been with the famous poem on Courage. I felt sure that the syndicate had never supplied me with a sensational serial half as good as mine, and I could conceive no plea upon which they would be justified in refusing mine.

They bought it. We had a difference concerning the price. They offered sixty pounds; I thought I might as well as not try to get a hundred, but when I had lifted them up to seventy-five, the force of bluff would no further go, and the bargain was closed. I saw that by writing serials I could earn three guineas per half -day; I saw myself embarking upon a life of what Ebenezer Jones called "sensation and event"; I saw my prices increasing, even to three hundred pounds for a sixty thousand word yarn—my imagination stopped there.

The lingering remains of an artistic conscience prompted me to sign this eye-smiting work with a pseudonym. The syndicate, since my name was quite unknown in their world, made no objection, and I invented several aliases, none of which they liked. Then a friend presented me with a gorgeous pseudonym—"Sampson Death". Surely, I thought, the syndicate will appreciate the subtle power of that! But no! They averred that their readers would be depressed by Sampson Death at the head of every installment.

“Why not sign your own name?” they suggested.

And I signed my own name. I, apprentice of Flaubert et Cie., stood forth to the universe as a sensation-monger.

The syndicate stated that they would like to have the refusal of another serial from my pen.

In correcting the proofs of the first one, I perceived all the opportunities I had missed in it, and I had visions of a sensational serial absolutely sublime in those qualities that should characterize a sensational serial. I knew all about Eugène Sue, and something about Wilkie Collins; but my ecstatic contemplation of an ideal serial soared far beyond these. I imagined a serial decked with the profuse ornament of an Eastern princess, a serial at once grandiose and witty, at once modern and transcendental, a serial of which the interest should gradually close on the reader like a vice until it became intolerable, I saw the whole of London preoccupied with this serial instead of with cricket and politics. I heard the dandiacal City youths discussing in first-class compartments on the Underground what would happen next in it. I witnessed a riot in Fleet Street because I had, accidentally on purpose, delayed my copy for twenty-four hours, and the editor of *The Daily*—had been compelled to come out with an apology. Lastly, I heard the sigh of relief exhaled to heaven by a whole people, when in the final installment I solved the mystery, untied the knot, relieved the cruel suspense.

Such was my dream—a dream that I never realized, but which I believe to be capable of realization. It is decades since even a second-class imaginative genius devoted itself entirely to the cult of the literary *frisson*. Sue excited a nation by admirable sensationalism. The feat might be accomplished again, and in this era so prolific in Napoleons of the press, it seems strange that no Napoleon has been able to organize the sensational serial on a Napoleonic scale.

I did not realize my dream, but I was inspired by it. Once more I received from the gods a plot scintillating with possibilities. It was less fine than the previous one; it was of the earth earthly; but it began with a scene quite unique in the annals of syndicates, and by this time I knew a little better how to keep the fire burning. I lavished wit and style on the thing, and there is no material splendor of modern life that I left out. I plunged into it with all my energy and enthusiasm, and wrote the fifteen installments in fifteen days; I tried to feel as much like Dumas *pére* as I could. But when I had done I felt, physically, rather more like the fragile Shelley or some wan curate than Dumas. I was a wreck.

The syndicate were willing to buy this serial, but they offered me no increase of rates. I declined to accept the old terms, and then the syndicate invited me to lunch. I made one of the greatest financial mistakes of my life on that accurst day, and my only excuse is that I was unaccustomed to being invited out to lunch by syndicates. I ought to have known, with all my boasted knowledge of the world of business, that syndicates do not invite almost unknown authors to lunch without excellent reason. I had refused the syndicate's offer, and the syndicate asked me to name a price for the entire rights of my tale. I named a price; it was a good price for me, then; but the words were scarcely out of my mouth before I saw that I had blundered. Too late! My terms were quietly accepted. Let me cast no slightest aspersion upon the methods of the syndicate: the bargain was completed before lunch had commenced.

The syndicate disposed of the whole first serial rights of my tale to a well-known London weekly. The proprietors of the paper engaged a first-class artist to illustrate it, they issued a special circular about it, they advertised it every week on 800 railway stations. The editor of the paper wrote me an extremely appreciative letter as to the effect of the serial from his point of view. The syndicate informed a friend of mine that it was the best serial they had ever had. After running in London it overran the provincial press like a locust-swarm. It was, in a word, a boom. It came out in volume form, and immediately went into a second edition; it still sells. It was the first of my books that *The Times* ever condescended to review; *The Spectator* took it seriously in a column and a quarter; and my friends took it seriously. I even received cables from foreign lands with offers to buy translation rights. I became known as the author of that serial. And all this, save for an insignificant trifle, to the profit of an exceedingly astute syndicate!

Subsequently I wrote other serials, but never again with the same verve. I found an outlet for my energies more amusing and more remunerative than the concoction of serials; and I am a serialist no longer.

CHAPTER 13

"A commercial play"

WHILE yet an assistant-editor, I became a dramatic critic through the unwillingness of my chief to attend a theatrical matinée performance given, by some forlorn little society, now defunct, for the rejuvenation of the English drama. My notice of the performance amused him, and soon afterwards he suggested that I should do our dramatic column in his stead. Behold me a "first-nighter"! When, with my best possible air of nonchalance and custom, I sauntered into my stall on a Lyceum first night, I glanced at the first rows of the pit with cold and aloof disdain. “Don’t you wish you were me?” I thought behind that supercilious mask. “You have stood for hours imprisoned between parallel iron railings. Many times I have stood with you. But never again, miserable pittites!” Nevertheless I was by no means comfortable in my stall. Around me were dozens of famous or notorious faces, the leading representatives of all that is glittering and factitious in the city of wealth, pleasure, and smartness. And everybody seemed to know everybody else. I alone seemed to be left out in the cold. My exasperated self-conscious fancy perceived in every haughty stare the enquiry: “Who is this whipper-snapper in the dress-suit that obviously cost four guineas in Cheapside?” I knew not a soul in that brilliant resort. During the intervals I went into the *foyer* and listened to the phrases which the critics tossed to each other over their liqueur-glasses. Never was such a genial confusion of “Old Chap”, “Old Man”, “Old Boy”, “Dear Old Pal”! “Are they all blood-brothers?” I asked myself. The banality, the perfect lack of any sort of aesthetic culture, which characterized their remarks on the piece, astounded me. I said arrogantly: "If I don't know more about the art of the theater than the whole crowd of you put together, I will go out and hang myself." Yet I was unspeakably proud to be among them. In a corner I caught sight of a renowned novelist whose work I respected. None noticed him, and he looked rather sorry for himself. "You and I...!" I thought. I had not attended many first nights before I discovered that the handful of theatrical critics whose articles it is possible to read without fatigue, made a point of never leaving their stalls. They were nobody's old chap, and nobody's old pal. I copied their behavior.

First on my own paper, and subsequently on two others, I practiced dramatic criticism for five or six years. Although I threw it up in the end mainly from sheer lassitude, I enjoyed the work. It means late nights, and late nights are perdition; but there is a meretricious glamour about it that attracts the foolish moth in me, and this I am bound to admit. My trifling influence over the public was decidedly on the side of the angels. I gradually found that I possessed a coherent theory of the drama, definite critical standards, and all the rest of the apparatus; in short, that I had something to say. And my verdicts had a satisfactory habit of coinciding with those of the two foremost theatrical critics in London—perhaps in Europe (I need not name them). It is a somewhat strange fact that I made scarcely any friends in the theater. After all those years of assiduous first-nighting, I was almost as solitary in the auditorium on the evening when I bade a *blasé* adieu to the critical bench as when I originally entered it. I fancied I had wasted my time and impaired my constitution in emulating the achievements of Théophile Gautier, Hazlitt, Francisque Sarcey and M. Jules Lemaître, to say nothing of Button Cook and Mr. Clement Scott. My health may have suffered; but, as it happened, I had not quite wasted my time.

"Why don't you write a play yourself?"

This blunt question was put to me by a friend, an amateur actor, whom I had asked to get up some little piece or other for an entertainment in the Theater Royal back-drawing-room of my house.

"Quite out of my line," I replied, and I was absolutely sincere. I had no notion whatever of writing for the stage. I felt sure that I had not the aptitude.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "It's as easy as falling off a log."

We argued, and I was on the point of refusing the suggestion, when the spirit of wild adventure overcame me, and I gravely promised my friend that I would compose a duologue if he and his wife would promise to perform it at my party. The affair was arranged. I went to bed with the conviction that in the near future I stood a fair chance of looking an ass. However, I met with what I thought to be an amusing idea for a curtain-raiser the next morning, and in the afternoon I wrote the piece complete. I enjoyed writing it, and as I read it aloud to myself I laughed at it. I discovered that I had violated the great canon of dramatic art,—Never keep your audience in the dark, and this troubled me (Paul Hervieu had not then demonstrated by his *L'Enigme* that that canon may be broken with impunity); but

I could not be at the trouble of reconstructing the whole play for the sake of an Aristotelian maxim. I at once posted the original draft to my friend with this note: "Dear —, Here is the play which last night I undertook to write for you."

The piece was admirably rendered to an audience of some thirty immortal souls—of course very sympathetic immortal souls. My feelings, as the situation which I had invented gradually developed into something alive on that tiny make-shift stage, were peculiar and, in a way, alarming. Every one who has driven a motor-car knows the uncanny sensation that ensues when for the first time in your life you pull the starting lever, and the Thing beneath you begins mysteriously and formidably to move. It is at once an astonishment, a terror, and a delight. I felt like that as I watched the progress of my first play. It was as though I had unwittingly liberated an energy greater than I knew, actually created something vital. This illusion of physical vitality is the exclusive possession of the dramatist; the novelist, the poet, cannot share it. The play was a delicious success. People laughed so much that some of my most subtle jocosities were drowned in the appreciative cachinnation. The final applause was memorable, at any rate to me. No mere good-nature can simulate the unique ring of genuine applause, and this applause was genuine. It was a microscopic triumph for me, but it was a triumph. Every one said to me: “But you are a dramatist!“ “Oh, no!” I replied awkwardly; “this trifle is really nothing.” But the still small voice of my vigorous self-confidence said: “Yes, you are, and you ought to have found it out years ago!” Among my audience was a publisher. He invited me to write for him a little book of one-act farces for amateurs; his terms were agreeable. I wrote three such farces, giving two days to each, and the volume was duly published; no book of mine has cost me less trouble. The reviews of it were lavish in praise of my “unfailing wit”; the circulation was mediocre. I was asked by companies of amateur actors up and down the country to assist at rehearsals of these pieces; but I could never find the energy to comply, save once. I hankered after the professional stage. By this time I could see that I was bound to enter seriously into the manufacture of stage-plays. My readers will have observed that once again in my history the inducement to embark for a fresh port had been quite external and adventitious.

I had a young friend with an extraordinary turn for brilliant epigram and an equally extraordinary gift for the devising of massive themes. He showed me one day the manuscript of a play. My faith in my instinct for form, whether in drama or fiction, was complete, and I saw instantly that what this piece lacked was form, which means intelligibility. It had everything except intelligibility. “Look here!” I said to him, “we will write a play together, you and I. We can do something that will knock spots off—” etc., etc. We determined upon a grand drawing-room melodrama which should unite style with those qualities that make for financial success on the British stage. In a few days my friend produced a list of about a dozen “ideas” for the piece. I chose the two largest and amalgamated them. In the confection of the plot, and also throughout the entire process of manufacture, my experience as a dramatic critic proved valuable. I believe my friend had only seen two plays in his life. We accomplished our first act in a month or so, and when this was done and the scenario of the other three written out, we informed each other that the stuff was exceedingly good.

Part of my share in the play was to sell it. I knew but one man of any importance in the theatrical world; he gave me an introduction to the manager of a West End theater second to none in prestige and wealth. The introduction had weight; the manager intimated by letter that his sole object in life was to serve me, and in the meantime he suggested an appointment. I called one night with our first act and the scenario, and amid the luxuriousness of the managerial room, the aroma of coffee, the odor of Turkish cigarettes, I explained to that manager the true greatness of our play. I have never been treated with a more distinguished politeness; I might have been Victorien Sardou, or Ibsen... (no, not Ibsen). In quite a few days the manager telephoned to my office and asked me to call the same evening. He had read the manuscript; he thought very highly of it, very highly. "But—" Woe! Desolation! Dissipation of airy castles! It was preposterous on our part to expect that our first play should be commissioned by a leading theater. But indeed we had expected this miracle. The fatal "But" arose from a difficulty of casting the principal part; so the manager told me. He was again remarkably courteous, and he assuaged the rigor of his refusal by informing me that he was really in need of a curtain-raiser with a part for a certain actress of his company; he fancied that we could supply him with the desired *bibelot*; but he wanted it at once, within a week. Within a week my partner and I had each written a one-act play, and in less than a fortnight I received a third invitation to discuss coffee, Turkish cigarettes, and plays. The manager began to talk about the play which was under my own signature.

"Now, what is your idea of terms?" he said, walking to and fro.

"Can it be true," I thought, "that I have actually sold a play to this famous manager?" In a moment my simple old ambitions burst like a Roman candle into innumerable bright stars. I had been content hitherto with the prospect of some fame, a thousand a year, and a few modest luxuries. But I knew what the earnings of successful dramatists were. My thousand increased tenfold; my mind dwelt on all the complex sybaritism of European capitals; and I saw how I could make use of the unequalled advertisement of theatrical renown to find a ready market for the most artistic fiction that I was capable of writing. This new scheme of things sprang into my brain instantaneously, full-grown.

I left the theater an accepted dramatist.

It never rains but it pours. My kind manager mentioned our stylistic drawing-room melodrama to another manager with such laudation that the second manager was eager to see it. Having seen it, he was eager to buy it. He gave us a hundred down to finish it in three months, and when we had finished it he sealed a contract for production with another check for a hundred. At the same period, through the mediation of the friend who had first introduced me to this world where hundreds were thrown about like fivers, I was commissioned by the most powerful theatrical manager on earth to assist in the dramatization of a successful novel; and this led to another commission of a similar nature, on more remunerative terms. Then a certain manager telegraphed for me (in the theater all business is done by telegraph and cable), and offered me a commission to compress a five-act Old English comedy into three acts.

"We might have offered this to So-and-So or So-and-So," they said, designating persons of importance. "But we preferred to come to you."

"I assume my name is to appear?" I said.

But my name was not to appear, and I begged to be allowed to decline the work.

I suddenly found myself on terms of familiarity with some of the great ones of the stage.

I found myself invited into the Garrick Club, and into the more Bohemian atmosphere of the Green Room Club. I became accustomed to hearing the phrase: "You are the dramatist of the future." One afternoon I was walking down Bedford Street when a hand was placed on my shoulder, and a voice noted for its rich and beautiful quality exclaimed: “How the devil are you, my dear chap?” The speaker bears a name famous throughout the English-speaking world.

“You are arriving!” I said to myself, naively proud of this greeting. I had always understood that the theatrical “ring” was impenetrable to an outsider; and yet I had stepped into the very middle of it without the least trouble.

My collaborator and I then wrote a farce. “We can’t expect to sell everything,” I said to him warningly, but I sold it quite easily. Indeed I sold it, repurchased it, and sold it again, within the space of three months.

Reasons of discretion prevent me from carrying my theatrical record beyond this point.

I have not spoken of the artistic side of this play-concoction, because it scarcely has any. My aim in writing plays, whether alone or in collaboration, has always been strictly commercial I wanted money in heaps, and I wanted advertisement for my books. Here and there, in the comedies and farces in which I have been concerned, a little genuine dramatic art has, I fancy, been introduced; but surreptitiously, and quite unknown to the managers. I have never boasted of it in managerial apartments. That I have amused myself while constructing these arabesques of intrigue and epigram is indubitable, whether to my credit or discredit as a serious person. I laugh constantly in writing a farce. I have found it far easier to compose a commercial play than an artistic novel. How our princes of the dramatic kingdom can contrive to spend two years over a single piece, as they say they do, I cannot imagine. The average play contains from eighteen to twenty thousand words; the average novel contains eighty thousand; after all, writing is a question of words. At the rate of a thousand words a day, one could write a play three times over in a couple of months; prefix a month—thirty solid days of old Time!—for the perfecting of the plot, and you will be able to calculate the number of plays producible by an expert craftsman in a year. And unsuccessful plays are decidedly more remunerative than many successful novels. I am quite certain that the vast majority of failures produced in the West End mean to their authors a minimum remuneration of ten pounds per thousand words. In the fiction-mart ten pounds per thousand is gilded opulence. I am neither Sardou, Sudermann, nor George R. Sims, but I know what I am talking about, and I say that dramatic composition for the market is child's play compared to the writing of decent average fiction—provided one has an instinct for stage effect.

CHAPTER 14

"A publisher's reader"

IT cuts me to the heart to compare English with American publishers to the disadvantage, however slight, of the former; but the exigencies of a truthful narrative demand from me this sacrifice of personal feeling to the god in "the sleeping-car emblematic of British enterprise". The representative of a great American firm came over to England on a mission to cultivate personal relations with authors of repute and profitableness. Among other documents of a similar nature, he had an introduction to myself; I was not an author of repute and profitableness, but

I was decidedly in the movement and a useful sort of person to know. We met and became friends, this ambassador and I; he liked my work, a sure avenue to my esteem; I liked his genial shrewdness. Shortly afterwards, there appeared in a certain paper an unsigned article dealing, in a broad survey alleged to be masterly, with the evolution of the literary market during the last thirty years. My American publisher read the article—he read everything—and, immediately deciding in his own mind that I was the author of it, he wrote me an enthusiastic letter of appreciation. He had not been deceived; I was the author of the article. Within the next few days it happened that he encountered an English publisher who complained that he could not find a satisfactory "reader". He informed the English publisher of my existence, referred eulogistically to my article, and gave his opinion that I was precisely the man whom the English publisher needed. The English publisher had never heard of me (I do not blame him, I merely record), but he was so moved by the American's oration that he invited me to lunch at his club. I lunched at his club, in a discreet street off Piccadilly (an aged and a sound wine!), and after lunch, my host drew me out to talk at large on the subject of authors, publishers, and cash, and the interplay of these three. I talked. I talked for a very long while, enjoying it. The experience was a new one for me. The publisher did not agree with all that I said, but he agreed with a good deal of it, and at the close of the somewhat exhausting assize, in which between us we had judged the value of nearly every literary reputation in England, he offered me the post of principal reader to his firm, and I accepted it.

It is, I believe, an historical fact that authors seldom attend the funeral of a publisher's reader. They approve the sepulture, but do not, save sometimes in a spirit of ferocious humor, lend to the procession the dignity of their massive figures. Nevertheless, the publisher's reader is the most benevolent person on earth. He is so perforce. He may begin his labors in the slaughterous vein of *The Saturday Review*; but time and the extraordinary level mediocrity of manuscripts soon cure him of any such tendency. He comes to refuse but remains to accept. He must accept something—or where is the justification of his existence? Often, after a prolonged run of bad manuscripts, I have said to myself: “If I don’t get a chance to recommend something soon I shall be asked to resign.” I long to look on a manuscript and say that it is good, or that there are golden sovereigns between the lines. Instead of searching for faults I search for hidden excellences. No author ever had a more lenient audience than I, If the author would only believe it, I want, I actually desire, to be favorably impressed by his work. When I open the parcel of typescript I beam on it with kindly eyes, and I think: “Perhaps there is something really good here”; and in that state of mind I commence the perusal. But there never is anything really good there. In an experience not vast, but extending over some years, only one book with even a touch of genius has passed through my hands; that book was so faulty and so willfully wild, that I could not unreservedly advise its publication and my firm declined it; I do not think that the book has been issued elsewhere. I have “discovered” only two authors of talent; one of these is very slowly achieving a reputation; of the other I have heard nothing since his first book, which resulted in a financial loss. Time and increasing knowledge of the two facts have dissipated for me the melancholy and affecting legend of literary talent going a-begging because of the indifference of publishers. O young author of talent, would that I could find you and make you understand how the publisher yearns for you as the lover for his love! *Qua* publisher's reader, I am a sad man, a man confirmed in disappointment, a man in whom the phenomenon of continued hope is almost irrational. When I look back along the frightful vista of dull manuscripts that I have refused or accepted, I tremble for the future of English literature (or should tremble, did I not infallibly know that the future of English literature is perfectly safe after all)! And yet I have by no means drunk the worst of the cup of mediocrity. The watery milk of the manuscripts sent to my employer has always been skimmed for me by others; I have had only the cream to savor. I am asked sometimes why publishers publish so many bad books; and my reply is: "Because they can't get better." And this is a profound truth solemnly enunciated.

People have said to me: *"But you are so critical; you condemn everything."* Such is the complaint of the laity against the initiate, against the person who has diligently practiced the cultivation of his taste. And, roughly speaking, it is a well-founded and excusable complaint. The person of fine taste does condemn nearly everything. He takes his pleasure in a number of books so limited as to be almost nothing in comparison with the total mass of production. Out of two thousand novels issued in a year, he may really enjoy half-a-dozen at the outside. And the one thousand nine hundred and ninety-four he lumps together in a wholesale contempt which draws no distinctions. This is right. This contributes to the preservation of a high standard. But the laity will never be persuaded that it is just. The point I wish to make, however, is that when I sit down to read for my publisher I first of all forget my literary exclusiveness, I sink the aesthetic aristocrat and become a plain man. By a deliberate act of imagination, I put myself in the place, not of the typical average reader — for there is no such person — but of a composite of the various *genera* of average reader known to publishing science. I am that composite for the time; and, being so, I remain quiescent and allow the book to produce its own effect on me. I employ no canons, rules, measures. Does the book bore me—that condemns it. Does it interest me, ever so slightly—that is enough to entitle it to further consideration. When I have decided that it interests the imaginary composite whom I represent, then I become myself again, and proceed scientifically to enquire why it has interested, and why it has not interested more intensely; I proceed to catalogue its good and bad qualities, to calculate its chances, to assay its monetary worth.

The first gift of a publisher's reader should be imagination; without imagination, the power to put himself in a position in which actually he is not, fine taste is useless—indeed, it is worse than useless. The ideal publisher's reader should have two perfections—perfect taste and perfect knowledge of what the various kinds of other people deem to be taste. Such qualifications, even in a form far from perfect, are rare. A man is born with them; though they may be cultivated, they cannot either of them be acquired. The remuneration of the publisher's reader ought, therefore, to be high, lavish, princely. It it not. It has nothing approaching these characteristics. Instead of being regarded as the ultimate seat of directing energy, the brain within the publisher's brain, the reader often exists as a sort of offshoot, an accident, an external mechanism which must be employed because it is the custom to employ it. As one reflects upon the experience and judgment which readers must possess, the responsibility which weighs on them, and the brooding hypochondrias is engendered by their mysterious calling, one wonders that their salaries do not enable them to reside in Park Lane or Carlton House Terrace. The truth is, that, they exist precariously in Walham Green, Camberwell, or out in the country where rents are low.

I have had no piquant adventures as a publisher's reader. The vocation fails in piquancy: that is precisely where it does fail. Occasionally when a manuscript comes from some established author who has been deemed the private property of another house, there is the excitement of discovering from the internal evidence of the manuscript, or from the circumstantial evidence of public facts carefully collated, just why that manuscript has been offered to my employer; and the discovered reason is always either amusing or shameful. But such excitements are rare, and not very thrilling after all. No! Reading for a publisher does not foster the joy of life. I have never done it with enthusiasm; and, frankly, I continue to do it more from habit than from inclination. One learns too much in the role. The gilt is off the gingerbread, and the bloom is off the rye, for a publisher's reader. The statistics of circulations are before him; and no one who is aware of the actual figures which literary advertisements are notoriously designed to conceal can be called happy until he is dead.

CHAPTER 15

"Nearly all lived in the country"

WHEN I had been in London a decade, I stood aside from myself and reviewed my situation with the god-like and detached impartiality of a trained artistic observer. And what I saw was a young man who pre-eminently knew his way about, and who was apt to be rather too complacent over this fact; a young man with some brilliance but far more shrewdness; a young man with a highly developed faculty for making a little go a long way; a young man who was accustomed to be listened to when he thought fit to speak, and who was decidedly more inclined to settle questions than to raise them.

This young man had invaded the town as a clerk at twenty-five shillings a week, paying six shillings a week for a bed-sitting room, three- pence for his breakfast, and sixpence for his vegetarian dinner. The curtain falls on the prologue. Ten years elapse. The curtain rises on the figure of an editor, novelist, dramatist, critic, connoisseur of all arts. See him in his suburban residence, with its poplar-shaded garden, its bicycle-house at the extremity thereof, and its horizon composed of the District Railway Line. See the study, lined with two thousand books, garnished with photogravures, and furnished with a writing-bureau and a chair and nothing else. See the drawing-room with its artistic wallpaper, its Kelmscotts, its water-colors of a pallid but indubitable distinction, its grand piano on which are a Wagnerian score and Bach's Two-part Inventions. See the bachelor's bedroom, so austere and precise, wherein Boswell's *Johnson* and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mai* exist peaceably together on the night-table. The entire machine speaks with one voice, and it tells you that there are no flies on that young man, that that young man never gives the wrong change. He is in the movement, he is correct; but at the same time he is not so simple as not to smile with contemptuous toleration at all movements and all correctness. He knows. He is a complete guide to art and life. His innocent foible is never to be at a loss, and never to be carried away—save now and then, because an occasional ecstasy is good for the soul. His knowledge of the *coulisses* of the various arts is wonderful. He numbers painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, among his intimate friends; and no artistic manifestation can possibly occur that he is unable within twenty-four hours to assess at its true value. He is terrible against *cabotins*, no matter where he finds them, and this seems to be his hobby: to expose *cabotins*.

He is a young man of method; young men do not arrive without method at the condition of being encyclopedias; his watch is as correct as his judgments. He breakfasts at eight sharp, and his housekeeper sets the kitchen clock five minutes fast, for he is a terrible Ivan at breakfast. He glances at a couple of newspapers, first at the list of "publications received", and then at the news. Of course he is not hoodwinked by newspapers. He will meet the foreign editor of *The Daily*—at lunch and will learn the true inwardness of that exploded *canard* from Berlin. Having assessed the newspapers, he may interpret to his own satisfaction a movement from a Mozart piano sonata, and then he will brush his hat, pick up sundry books, and pass sedately to the station. The station-master is respectfully cordial, and quite ready to explain to him the secret causation of delays, for his season-ticket is a white one. He gets into a compartment with a stockbroker, a lawyer, or a tea-merchant, and immediately falls to work; he does his minor reviewing in the train, fostering or annihilating reputations while the antique engine burrows beneath the squares of the West End; but his brain is not so fully occupied that he cannot spare a corner of it to meditate upon the extraordinary ignorance and simplicity of stockbrokers, lawyers, and tea-merchants. He reaches his office, and for two or three hours practices that occupation of watching other people work which is called editing: a process always of ordering, of rectifying, of laying down the law, of being looked up to, of showing how a thing ought to be done and can be done, of being flattered and cajoled, of dispensing joy or gloom—in short, the Jupiter and Shah of Persia business. He then departs, as to church, to his grill-room, where for a few moments himself and the cook hold an anxious consultation to decide which particular chop or which particular steak out of a mass of chops and steaks shall have the honor of sustaining him till tea-time. The place is full of literary shahs and those about to be shahs. They are all in the movement; they constitute the movement. They ride the comic-opera whirlwinds of public opinion and direct the tea-cup storms of popularity. The young man classes most of them with the stockbroker, the lawyer, and the tea-merchant. With a few he fraternizes, and these few save their faces by appreciating the humor of the thing. Soon afterwards he goes home, digging en route the graves of more reputations, and, surrounded by the two thousand volumes, he works in seclusion at his various activities that he may triumph openly. He descends to dinner stating that he has written so many thousand words, and excellent words too—stylistic, dramatic, tender, witty. There may be a theatrical first-night toward, in which case he returns to town and sits in the seat of the languid for a space. Or he stays within doors and discusses with excessively sophisticated friends the longevity of illusions in ordinary people. At length he retires and reads himself to sleep. His last thoughts are the long, long thoughts of his perfect taste and tireless industry, and of the aesthetic darkness which covers the earth....

Such was the young man I inimically beheld. And I was not satisfied with him. He was gorgeous, but not sufficiently gorgeous. He had done much in ten years, and I excused his facile pride, but he had not done enough. The curtain had risen on the first act of the drama of life, but the action, the intrigue, the passion seemed to hesitate and halt. Was this the artistic and creative life, this daily round? Was this the reality of that which I had dreamed? Where was the sense of romance, the consciousness of felicity? I felt that I had slipped into a groove which wore deeper every day. It seemed to me that I was fettered and tied down. I had grown weary of journalism. The necessity of being at a certain place at a certain hour on so many days of the week grew irksome to me; I regarded it as invasive of my rights as a free-born Englishman, as shameful and scarcely tolerable. Was I a horse that I should be ridden on the curb by a Board of Directors? I objected to the theory of proprietors. The occasional conferences with the Board, though conducted with all the ritual of an extreme punctilio, were an indignity. The suave requests of the chairman: "Will you kindly tell us—?" And my defensive replies, and then the dismissal: "Thank you, Mr. —, I think we need trouble you no further this morning." And my exit, irritated by the thought that I was about to be discussed with the freedom that Boards in conclave permit themselves. It was as bad as being bullied by London University at an examination. I longed to tell this Board, with whom I was so amicable on unofficial occasions, that they were using a razor to cut firewood. I longed to tell them that the nursing of their excellent and precious organ was seriously interfering with the composition of great works and the manufacture of a dazzling reputation. I longed to point out to them that the time would come when they would mention to their friends with elaborate casualness and covert pride that they had once employed me, the unique me, at a salary measurable in hundreds.

Further, I was ill-pleased with literary London. "You have a literary life here," an American editor once said to me. "There is a literary circle, an atmosphere. . . We have no such thing in New York." I answered that no doubt we had; but I spoke without enthusiasm. I suppose that if any one "moved in literary circles,", I did, then. Yet I derived small satisfaction from my inclusion within those circumferences. To me there was a lack of ozone in the atmosphere which the American editor found so invigorating. Be it understood that when I say "literary circles", I do not in the least mean genteel Bohemia, the world of informal At-Homes that are all formality, where the little lions growl on their chains in a row against a drawing-room wall, and the hostess congratulates herself that every single captive in the salon has "done something". Such polite racketing, such discreet orgies of the higher intellectuality, may suit the elegant triflers, the authors of monographs on Velasquez, golf, Dante, asparagus, royalties, ping-pong, and Empire; but the business men who write from ten to fifty thousands words a week without chattering about it, have no use for the literary menagerie. I lived among the real business men—and even so I was dissatisfied. I believe too that they were dissatisfied, most of them. There is an infection in the air of London, a zymotic influence which is the mysterious cause of unnaturalness, pose, affectation, artificiality, moral neuritis, and satiety. One loses grasp of the essentials in an undue preoccupation with the vacuities which society has invented. The distractions are too multiform. One never gets a chance to talk common-sense with one's soul.

Thirdly, the rate at which I was making headway did not please me. My reputation was growing, but only like a coral-reef. Many people had an eye on me, as on one for whom the future held big things. Many people took care to read almost all that I wrote. But my name had no significance for the general public. The mention of my name would have brought no recognizing smile to the average person who is "fond of reading". I wanted to do something large, arresting, and decisive. And I saw no chance of doing this. I had too many irons in the fire. I was frittering myself away in a multitude of diverse activities of the pen.

I pondered upon these considerations for a long while. I saw only one way out, and, at last, circumstances appearing to conspire to lead me into that way, I wrote a letter to my Board of Directors and resigned my editorial post. I had decided to abandon London, that delectable paradise of my youthful desires. A To-let notice flourished suddenly in my front-garden, and my world became aware that I was going to desert it. The majority thought me rash and unwise, and predicted an ignominious return to Fleet Street. But the minority upheld my resolution. I reached down a map of England, and said that I must live on a certain main-line at a certain minimum distance from London. This fixed the neighborhood of my future home. The next thing was to find that home, and with the aid of friends and a bicycle I soon found it. One fine wet day I stole out of London in a new quest of romance. No one seemed to be fundamentally disturbed over my exodus. I remarked to myself: “Either you are a far-seeing and bold fellow, or you are a fool. Time will show which.” And that night I slept, or failed to sleep, in a house that was half a mile from the next house, three miles from a station, and three miles from a town. I had left the haunts of men with a vengeance, and incidentally I had left a regular income.

I ran over the list of our foremost writers: they nearly all lived in the country.

CHAPTER 16

"Regrets of the dying couch"

WHEN I had settled down into the landscape, bought my live-stock, studied manuals on horses, riding, driving, hunting, dogs, poultry, and wildflowers, learned to distinguish between wheat and barley and between a six-year-old and an aged screw, shot a sparrow on the fence only to find it was a redbreast, drunk the cherry-brandy of the Elizabethan inn, played in the village cricket team, and ceased to feel self-conscious in riding-breeches, I perceived with absolute certainty that I had made no error; I knew that, come poverty or the riches of Indian short stories, I should never again live permanently in London. I expanded, and in my expansion I felt rather sorry for Londoners. I perceived, too, that the country possessed commercial advantages which I had failed to appreciate before. When you live two and a half miles from a railway you can cut a dash on an income which in London spells omnibus instead of cab. For myself I have a profound belief in the efficacy of cutting a dash. You invite an influential friend down for the week-end. You meet him at the station with a nice little grey mare in a phaeton, and an unimpeachable Dalmatian running behind. The turn-out is nothing alone, but the pedigree printed in the pinkiness of that dog's chaps and in the exiguity of his tail, spotted to the last inch, would give tone to a coster's cart. You see that your influential friend wishes to comment, but as you gather up the reins you carefully begin to talk about the weather and prices per thousand. You rush him home in twelve minutes, skimming gate posts. On Monday morning, purposely running it fine, you hurry him into a dog-cart behind a brown cob fresh from a pottle of beans, and you whirl him back to the station in ten minutes, up-hill half the way. You fling him into the train, with ten seconds to spare. "This is how we do it in these parts," your studiously nonchalant face says to him. He thinks. In a few hours Fleet Street becomes aware that young So-and-so, who lately buried himself in the country, is alive and lusty. Your stock rises. You go up one. You extort respect. You are ticketed in the retentive brains of literary Shahs as a success. And you still have the dog left for another day.

In the country there is plenty of space and plenty of time, and no damnable fixed relation between these two; in other words, a particular hour does not imply a particular spot for you, and this is something to an author, I found my days succeeding each other with a leisurely and adorable monotony. I lingered over breakfast like a lord, perusing the previous evening's papers with as much gusto as though they were hot from the press. I looked sideways at my work, with a non-committal air, as if saying: "I may do you or I may not. I shall see how I feel." I went out for a walk, followed by dogs less spectacular than the Dalmatian, to collect ideas. I had nothing to think about but my own direct productiveness. I stopped to examine the progress of trees, to discuss meteorology with road menders, to wonder why lambs always waggled their tails during the act of taking sustenance. All was calmness, serenity. The embryo of the article or the chapter faintly adumbrated itself in my mind, assumed a form. One idea, then another; then an altercation with the dogs, ending in castigation, disillusion, and pessimism for them. Suddenly I exclaimed: "I think I've got enough to go on with!" And I turned back homewards. I reached my study and sat down. From my windows I beheld a magnificent panorama of hills. Now the contemplation of hills is uplifting to the soul; it leads to inspiration and induces nobility of character, but it has a tendency to interfere with actual composition. I stared long at those hills. Should I work, should I not work? A brief period always ensued when the odds were tremendous against any work being done that day. Then I seized the pen and wrote the title. Then another dreadful and disconcerting pause, all ideas having scuttled away like mice to their holes. Well, I must put something down, however ridiculous. I wrote a sentence, feeling first that it would not serve and then that it would have to serve, anyway. I glanced at the clock. Ten twenty-five! I watched the clock in a sort of hypnotism that authors know of, till it showed ten-thirty. Then with a horrible wrench I put the pen in the ink again... Jove! Eleven forty-five, and I had written seven hundred words. Not bad stuff that! Indeed, very good! Time for a cigarette and a stroll round to hear wisdom from the gardener. I resumed at twelve, and then in about two minutes it was one o'clock and lunch time. After lunch, rest for the weary and the digesting; slumber; another stroll. Arrival of the second post on a Russian pony that cost fifty shillings. Tea, and perusal of the morning paper. Then another spell of work, and the day was gone, vanished, distilled away. And about five days made a week, and forty-eight weeks a year.

No newspaper-proprietors, contributors, circulations, placards, tape-machines, theaters, operas, concerts, picture-galleries, clubs, restaurants, parties. Undergrounds! Nothing artificial, except myself and my work! And nothing, save the fear of rent-day, to come between myself and my work!

It was dull, you will tell me. But I tell you it was magnificent. Monotony, solitude, are essential to the full activity of the artist. Just as a horse is seen best when coursing alone over a great plain, so the fierce and callous egotism of the artist comes to its perfection in a vast expanse of custom, leisure, and apparently vacuous reverie. To insist on forgetting his work, to keep his mind a blank until the work, no longer to be held in check, rushes into that emptiness and fills it up—that is one of the secrets of imaginative creation. Of course it is not a recipe for every artist. I have known artists, and genuine ones, who could keep their minds empty and suck in the beauty of the world for evermore without the slightest difficulty; who only wrote, as the early Britons hunted, when they were hungry and there was nothing in the pot. But I was not of that species. On the contrary, the incurable habit of industry, the itch for the pen, was my chiefest curse. To be unproductive for more than a couple of days or so was to be miserable. Like most writers I was frequently the victim of an illogical, indefensible and causeless melan-

choly; but one kind of melancholy could always be explained, and that was the melancholy of idleness. I could never divert myself with hobbies. I did not read much, except in the way of business. Two hours reading, even of Turgenev or Balzac or Montaigne, wearied me out. An author once remarked to me:
"I know enough, I don't read books, I write 'em"
It was a haughty and arrogant saying, but there is a sense in which it was true. Often I have felt like that: "I know enough, I feel enough. If my future is as long as my past, I shall still not be able to put down the tenth part of what I have already acquired." The consciousness of this, of what an extraordinary and wonderful museum of perceptions and emotions my brain was, sustained me many a time against the chagrins, the delays, and the defeats of the artistic career. Often have I said inwardly: "World, when I talk with you, dine with you, wrangle with you, love you, and hate you, I condescend!" Every artist has said that. People call it conceit; people may call it what they please. One of the greatest things a great man said, is:—

I know I am august.
I do not trouble my spirit to indicate itself or to be understood....
I exist as I am, that is enough.
If no other in the world be aware I sit content.
And if each and all be aware I sit content

Nevertheless, for me, the contentment of the ultimate line surpassed the contentment of the penultimate. And therefore it was, perhaps, that I descended on London from time to time like a wolf on the fold, and made the world aware, and snatched its feverish joys for a space, and then, surfeited and advertised, went back and relapsed into my long monotony. And sometimes I would suddenly halt and address myself:

"You may be richer or you may be poorer; you may live in greater pomp and luxury, or in less. The point is that you will always be, essentially, what you are now. You have no real satisfaction to look forward to except the satisfaction of continually inventing, fancying, imagining, scribbling. Say another thirty years of these emotional ingenuities, these interminable variations on the theme of beauty. Is it good enough?"

And I answered: Yes.

But who knows? Who can preclude the regrets of the dying couch?

The End

INTERMISSION

KRIS MADDEN

I was disappointed the first time I finished *The Truth About An Author*. I loved the beginning where Arnold was on the rise and it had that 'rags-to-riches' quality about it. But later, money becomes his obsession, and writing a mere means to an end. It's conclusion with him retiring to the countryside and giving up on life and writing, and saying, 'yeah, this is okay, I guess I'll do this 'til I die, or whatever.' I thought, 'Now I know why this has been out of print for so many years because of this.'

It wasn't until I went back and looked at the date that it was published and found that it was penned prior to him writing the 30+ books that he would win international fame for. *The Truth About an Author* is a look at Arnold Bennett's life just prior to him writing those important works that would earn him his literary status as one of the great realist writers of the twentieth century.

The *truth* about Arnold Bennett didn't really end at him retiring to the countryside, but began there. The book was important for Arnold Bennett to write, because it allowed him to voice all of his thoughts and concerns; asking the questions that everyone asks about life, occupation, happiness, etc.

While I consider the book to be placed categorically in the tragedy section, the story of Bennett's life is most certainly one of triumph. The book is encouragement for those times when we find ourselves retired to the countryside and have given up, momentarily, on our hopes and dreams, and wonder, "what does it all mean?"

Bennett didn't know he would be remembered over a hundred years after his books were written. He didn't think he was going to write anything better, or more popular than what he'd already written. He thought he'd hit the top, he thought he'd achieved everything he could in his life. Little did he know, how far from the top he was. And that his literary career was really just beginning.

It reminds me that the best things in life that seem far, out of sight and out of reach, may be just ahead, waiting, a few steps from where I stand now.

The next section is one of the first and most thorough criticisms on the life and work of Arnold Bennett. *The Truth about an Author* is only half the story, because it's about how Arnold Bennett saw the world, but it's in this biography by P. J. Harvey Darton we can see how the world saw Arnold Bennett.

ARNOLD BENNETT

By P. J. HARVEY DARTON

CHAPTER 1

"The Industrious Apprentice"

BY a custom not unusual among authors, Arnold Bennett has renounced one gift of his godparents. It may be a mere perversion of modesty; or it may be one of those practical, insidious attacks on the public memory which lead to the stereotyping of such labels as Henry Irving or Hall Caine: whatever the cause, the novelist of the Five Towns has sloughed a name. He was christened Enoch Arnold Bennett. Which noted, the first name may be left to resemble its first holder, of whom we are told that he "was not".

Truth About An Author

Arnold Bennett came into the world on 27th May 1867. On the same day of the same year was born the Card, Edward Henry Machin, and in the same year the nuptials of the Bursley old wives, Constance Povey and Sophia Scales (nées Baines), were celebrated. This exact chronological parallel between creator and created is hardly of profound significance, but it is one of a number of minor coincidences of the kind.

“The town which had the foresight to bear me, and which is going to be famous on that score”—a cheerful piece of mock egotism from *The Truth About an Author*—was, more strictly, the district of Shelton, north-east of Hanley, in “The Five Towns” or Potteries. It is obvious that that whole region made an indelible impression on the young Arnold Bennett. He was evidently very sensitive to early impressions, and the minuteness of the local descriptions in the Five Towns novels reflects his extraordinary boyish receptivity. He says of the Baines’s shop, for instance—the scene of much of *The Old Wives’ Tale*—that “in the seventies, I had lived in the actual draper’s shop, and knew it as only a child could know it." He remembered also the sound of rattling saucepans when he was about two or three, and "a very long and mysterious passage that led to a pawnshop all full of black bundles." These are unexciting details, but they suggest that strange process of unconscious assimilation of environment during youth which so many authors transmute in later days into the fabric of life.

Arnold Bennett clearly discovered the solace of literature, in any real sense, after his school days were over, and it may perhaps be concluded that on the whole he received in youth little vital encouragement towards letters. It was not intended that the polite profession of writing was to furnish him with the bread and butter of life, much less the cakes and ale. Like Edwin Clayhanger, he was educated at Newcastle-under-Lyme, at the Endowed Middle School. He matriculated at London University ("that august negation of the very idea of a University") about 1885, and thenceforth devoted himself to the study of the law, in the office of his father, a solicitor.

He left the Five Towns in 1889, and went to

London, where he entered a solicitor's office, and "combined cunning in the preparation of costs with a hundred and thirty words a minute at shorthand." He received £200 a year for these services, and it was some time before he realized that he was one of Nature's journalists, and could earn greater sums by more congenial work.

Yet the realization might have come to him even earlier. Before he left Hanley he had been an unpaid contributor to a prominent local paper. It may have been the well-known *Staffordshire Sentinel* (the *Signal* of the novels); or it may have been an evanescent rival, like those connected with "Denry" Machin and George Cannon, the bigamous husband of Hilda Lessways. For some such journal, at any rate, he acted as local correspondent, and turned out, unfailingly, half-a-column a week of facetious and satirical comments upon the town's public and semi-public life. He tried also, during this early period, to write a short story and a serial: both failures. These experiences, no doubt, helped to give him facility, while they could hardly have afforded him room for useless vanity.

If the solicitor's office did not drive him into literature, it at any rate permitted the study of it. Arnold Bennett collected books—as a collector, not as a reader—and "simply gorged on English and French literature for the amusement I could extract from such gluttony." A chance observation by a friend, according to his own account, revealed to him that there might be an aesthetic side to art and letters: an equally fortuitous remark, a little later, suggested to him that he himself (*soi-disant*, till then, the most callous and immobile of philosophers) might possess the artistic temperament. He won a prize of twenty guineas in a journal which it is hard not to identify as *Tit-Bits*. He had a story accepted by *The Yellow Book*. The thing was done, both psychologically and in the facts of the market: he was an author, a man of letters. The date of this new birth may be put approximately at 1893.

The *Tit-Bits* prize was awarded for a compact humorous compression of that famous one-thousand-pound competition serial, Grant Allen's *What's Bred in the Bone*. *The Yellow Book* story ("A Letter Home") now appears as the last of *Tales of the Five*

Towns, with the footnote “written in 1893”; it appeared in print in 1895. That same year, 1893, saw the appearance of a work at once less ambitious and less loudly proclaimed—a serial story in the children’s magazine, *Chatterbox*, called *Sidney Yorke’s Friend*.

His activity soon became multifarious and incessant. Arnold Bennett turned free-lance journalist, contributing all manner of articles to all manner of magazines. He attained very soon a position of some security and responsibility, as sub-editor and subsequently editor of the woman’s journal, *Woman* (now defunct). Before long he was a regular contributor to *The Academy*, then passing through a St. Martin’s summer of literary excellence under the editorship of Mr. Lewis Hind (inspirer also of H. G. Wells). The mark of *The Academy* of those days was extreme clearness and flexibility of expression, wide knowledge, and a well-balanced alertness of judgment: there is to-day no literary journal quite of the type.

During this period, Arnold Bennett also acted as a fluent and omniscient reviewer, a dramatic critic, a playwright and a publisher's reader. An amusing account of these diversions appears in *The Truth About an Author*.

These were the outward signs of the apprentice author. The inward grace was a very deliberate and conscious study of what writing meant. In 1896 Arnold Bennett resolved to keep a journal.

> "Already he had decided to be a successful author, and, as he viewed it, the keeping of a journal was a most valuable part of the apprenticeship to that career... The peril he most dreaded was idleness, and the sin of thinking without writing."

The quotation is from a privately printed volume of selections from this journal (*Things that Interested Me*, Burslem, 1906); some extracts also appeared in *Methuen's Annual* (1914). The diary-keeper resolved to write in the journal so many words a day, to improve his powers of observation; and he kept his word. The outcome of such discipline, joined to industry, may be judged from an en-try made three years later:

> "Sunday, 31st Dec. 1899. This year I have written 335,340 words, grand total. 224 articles and stories, and four installments of a serial called *The Gates of Wrath* have actually been published; also my book of plays, *Polite Farces*. My work included six or eight short stories not yet published, also the greater part of a 55,000 word serial—*Love and Life*—for Tillotsons, and the whole draft, 80,000 words, of my Staffordshire novel, *Anna Tettioright*." (Retitled: *Anna of The Five Towns*)

The end of the century, more or less, closes this period. The books actually produced during it, apart from minor or anonymous works, and those already recorded, were *The Truth about an Author*, *Fame and Fiction* (both of which appeared in *The Academy*), *A Man from the North* (1898), *Journalism for Women* (1898: the fruit of experiences on Woman), and doubtless the substance of *How to Become an Author* (published in 1903). In 1900 Arnold Bennett went to live in France, remaining there nearly eight years. Many of his books were written there, at a cottage in Fontainebleau.

CHAPTER 2

"Life And Letters"

IN ten years or so, therefore, Arnold Bennett had learned the whole various routine of literary productiveness, and had "decided to be a successful author." How did he progress towards fulfilling his hopes? What was the relation, at this period of his career, between his life and his "letters"?

His first novel, *A Man from the North*, provides an index of ambition and accomplishment. It marks its author at once as a conscious, even a self-conscious, literary artist, striving after a certain objective effect. It was published by Mr. John Lane in England and the United States in 1898. To an expert, that statement alone says much. The mere print and binding of the first edition say no less. The book was, in fact, a product of "the eighteen-nineties"—of that strenuous and now dim period of deliberate artistic hypertrophy, when the British Barbarians were smitten from the hill-tops, when *The Yellow Book* was born and died and *The Savoy* rose from its ashes, itself a phoenix burnt untimely, when Wilde and Dowson and Beardsley were thought shocking, and Whistler not quite respectable. How far off now seems that discordant irruption into the Victorian afternoon; how near is Arnold Bennett.

A Man from the North was phenomenal. (I trust the real sense of the word is not yet wholly obsolete.) It was in the movement, but most distinctly not of it. It was before the movement, in one sense. It wore the literary air of the newer aesthetic evolution. It is by far the most "literary" of Arnold Bennett's books. Like A Letter Home, it is written with a visible attempt at "style"—at using words not solely as efficient, unemotional units in a mass. But it deals with the very class most abhorred by the then young lions. It is the story of a young Bursley man—a relation of the Clayton Vernons, typical Five Towns aristocrats—who came to London, to a lawyer's office, tried to become an author, half fell in love with one woman, and married another (a tea-shop waitress), eventually rejecting, for the sake of his marriage, that finer artistic career for which he was perhaps not wholly fitted. It is, to a great extent, a chronicle of the impressions London and life make on a provincial who is a mixture of business ability, artistic temperament and sensuous curiosity.

Now there is the first and greatest mystery of literature in this book. One may say Arnold Bennett was affected by the taste, the advanced taste, of his day; of course he was. One may say that, like many authors, he drew upon some of his own experiences; very likely he did. One may say that having learnt, by great diligence and practice, to write, he wrote: he did so, very skillfully; as Aristotle discovered, you become good by being good. One may say that he read and absorbed much French literature. It is all quite true. But not one word in those indubitable facts explains the great fact of authorship. They may have been the practical, determining causes of the new life which success in literature meant to Arnold Bennett. They were not the causative causes, nor the sole stimulus. How did the lawyer's clerk *really* become a novelist?

Such a question can never be answered. No author—unless one takes quite seriously Poe's cold-blooded, as it were posthumous, account of the taxidermy which produced *The Raven*—has yet contrived to reveal the obscure process by which he veritably and demonstrably puts words together in that order which we call poetry or prose. Arnold Bennett tells us that one stimulus to literature he received was a friend's remark that he was "highly strung". "When I had recovered from my stupefaction, I glowed with pride." That sentence alone is a whole epitome of psychology. Highly-strung pride would write self-consciously; it would select adjectives, track the *mot juste* to its lair in the cerebral windings, imagine all manner of sensitive flutterings which could only be real emotions by a pathetic fallacy. But it must have some subject matter, some quick or dead experience, upon which to work. And it must somehow bridge the immense gap between conception in the brain and the execution of those black and white marks on paper we call words. “Consistent sensationalism”, in the philosophic sense, “is speechless”: every emotion is over before it can possibly be recorded. What appears in print is a hybrid of impressions and reflections, varying in quality and density, according to the mood of the moment; some scientists would say varying according to the state of the digestion.

A Man from the North may be taken as, on the whole, the work of “highly-strung pride”. But the subject matter was produced out of past experience—out of cold, hoarded emotions; and the actual expression was controlled by the bloodless surgery of journalism, by the skilful manipulator of words, whose business it is, above all, to make his effects properly. Those two last possessions or qualities—experience of life and experience of letters—Arnold Bennett has always retained. The pride, the emotional conceit, he was very soon to suppress from visible appearance.

The practically coeval novel, *The Gates of Wrath*, shows pride or conceit only in a wayward form—the conceit of a man of genius setting out to show that he too can do the lesser things if he so will. Nearly every well-known novelist sooner or later unbends and tries to write a sensational novel better than the hardened professors of that trade. Arnold Bennett differs from his fellows in achieving more success than most of them; though *The Gates of Wrath* was not a very happy beginning in that vein. High spirits are in it, but neither the vital strength of experience nor the sensitiveness of "pride". It is concerned with a plot to do away with a very rich young man in the interests of his beautiful wife. It is written in the proper tremendous manner, with palpitations and alarms innumerable. It is of no great importance. It may be remarked that it reveals something of Arnold Bennett's curiously minute interest in illnesses, and introduces a method of murder—the conducting of a chill to a fever patient—used over again in *Leonora*, a few years later.

The two handbooks to journalism and the critical essays in *Fame and Fiction* hardly offer the same psychological riddles as the works of fiction. Obviously, the question of "subject and object", the emotions which make up personality, do not enter into their constitution at all fully. They are reasoned judgments upon ponderable experience. *Fame and Fiction*, indeed, is typical of that side of Arnold Bennett's work—the portion of his individuality which is entirely clearheaded has made up its mind upon an almost unsympathetic balance of considerations, and says what it thinks quite plainly. Yet the judgments so delivered are at bottom matters of faith, and the faith behind them is exceedingly significant. Arnold Bennett stands out, in these essays, as two persons—as a clear-headed, commonsense analyst, the highest power, in fact, of the skilled laborer; and as a convinced literary democrat.

> "The average reader [he asserts] is an intelligent and reasonable being... He has his worse and his better self, and there are times when he will yield to the former; but on the whole his impulses are good... In every writer who earns his respect and enduring love there is

> some central righteousness, which is capable of being traced or explained, and at which it is impossible to sneer." (*Fame and Fiction*, p. 10.)

That amounts to belief in the "constant" of humanity—to the faith that there is a residual element of agreement in all matters of opinion: very few people can get rid of all the accidental elements, but somewhere there is a residuum. The one good thing remains as an author's solid virtue, the many excrescences of fashion or prejudice pass. Fame dies; the soul lives. That is the belief underlying these critical essays; and it is a democratic belief, divorced from faith in public school and university education, or rank, or classical tradition. It is a trust in the ultimate good sense of ordinary men. It does not preclude, it even involves, a distrust of their present senselessness. Arnold Bennett tries to find out why they are senseless in regard to particular books, and where the grain of good sense lies hid.

That point of view, a dogma of democracy, is also a corollary of skilled labor. An experienced journalist knows better than anyone that humbug, pretentiousness, cheapness can only pay continuously if they disguise themselves utterly and become different things. But authors cannot change their tunes in any real sense; at least, very few can. Therefore, if they continue to be popular over a long period, there is something in their work worth consideration. A philosopher would say that no strong heresy dies until some fraction of it has become faith. A journalist would say:

> "If 50,000 people buy a novel whose shortcomings render it tenth-rate, we may be sure they have not conspired to do so, and also that their apparently strange unanimity is not due to chance." (*Fame and Fiction,* p. 5.)

That is Arnold Bennett, the journalist, speaking. It is also Arnold Bennett, the son of the most profoundly democratic society in England, the Five Towns middle class.

Journalism for Women and *How to Become an Author* need not detain us. If every literary aspirant would read them, publishers and editors could take six months' extra holiday every year. Superior persons may despise such guides to the Temple of Literature. The wise, even if they do not need them, can appreciate the sanity and thoroughness of the help offered. There is never any danger that aids to perfection will produce perfection.

We are left, then, with the history of these achievements, *The Truth about an Author*. It cannot be affirmed too emphatically that this is the truth about an author. For some reason or other—mainly, no doubt, because the memories of reviewers are apt to be young and of short range—this book on its reissue in 1914 was treated as practically a new work, though its authorship had long been an open secret. Moreover, its substance, even in 1914, appeared to horrify many readers, who were incapable of thinking that the commerce in serious printed matter could possibly be sordid. That horror was also expressed on the first appearance of the book in 1903, and earlier in serial form. I can only say, from personal experience, that no word in *The Truth About an Author* is exaggerated, and that people who write for money cannot help seeing that money is not beautiful.

The book is a model of bland lucidity. It is written and constructed with the consummate facility of experience, and as a maliciously accurate photograph of facts it cannot but afford amusement. It proves, if proof were needed, that an apparently (but not really) amorphous book like *The Old Wives' Tale* has behind it a vast accumulation of hard work. A few great authors have never done hard work—task work, that is to say, other than the desirable flow of genius. They are very few. A literary hack may look back upon the company of his dead, and take heart; for behind him, in the obscurity of their early labor, stand Shakespeare, Fielding, Johnson, Goldsmith, Thackeray and Dickens. There is no shame in learning one's business, nor yet in making fun of one's bread and butter.

Whether *The Truth About an Author* is the truth about Arnold Bennett is altogether another question. I have said that the psychology of literary effort is a probably insoluble mystery; it is as indefinable, indescribable a thing—indeed, much the same thing—as the psychology of poetry, which all poets define differently. Arnold Bennett tells the exterior facts of his evolution, and a little of the feelings and hopes which animated him. But though he has an unusual gift of getting outside his own skin, or of personal introspection, there are elements in his character which he himself can hardly examine without prejudice. He often seems to resemble his own inimitable hero, the Card—a business man with the freakish, insolent inspirations of genius, but above all a Five Towns man. It is time, therefore, to consider more closely Arnold Bennett's "domicile of origin", as the phraseology of Admiralty, Divorce and Probate would call it. He deliberately chose the profession of literature; he learnt minutely the business of it; but it was ultimately his environment that conditioned his progress in that profession. It is his local environment, too, that gives him a more than local importance to English literature.

CHAPTER 3

"The Five Towns"

THE Five Towns lie in the north of Staffordshire. They are the center of the greatest pottery manufacture in the world. "You cannot drink tea out of a teacup without the aid of the Five Towns; you cannot eat a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns" (*The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 3). As Arnold Bennett uses the term, the five towns are Tunstall ("Turnhill"), Burslem ("Bursley"), Hanley ("Hanbridge"), Stoke-upon-Trent ("Knype"), and Longton ("Longshaw"), with Newcastle-under-Lyme ("Oldcastle") as a sixth: "Oldcastle", indeed, is more prominent than "Longshaw". Politically, the towns and townships are differently grouped, and are no longer five. Newcastle is a borough by itself: it has been a borough for eight hundred years, and it lives upon that ancient dignity. The other fortresses of humanity are chiefly the outcome of industrialism. They are collectively named Stoke-On-Trent, which comprises Stoke-*upon*-Trent, Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton and Fenton, with their suburbs: this huge new borough, with a population of 235,000, was created in 1908, and began to exist officially in 1910.

The Five Towns are also the scene of iron smelting and coal-mining. Their architecture is therefore "an architecture of ovens and chimneys", and the atmosphere "is as black as its mud... it burns and smokes all night, so that Longshaw has been compared to hell" (*The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 3). Terra-cotta and unlovely unseasoned brick are the materials of its buildings; few are older than the middle of the nineteenth century, and the carbon which often adds a grey dignity to a Georgian house here but accentuates ugliness.

Yet a few miles away, in tiny villages with which Arnold Bennett, by his use of their names for other purposes in his books, is evidently familiar, lies the ordinary, unchanging country life of England. Staffordshire is one of the most English of counties, well-watered, full of trees and meadows and little hills, green and fertile, with ancient churches and bridges, and a cathedral town, Lichfield, that has a life not only gracious with the memories of its eighteenth-century dignity, but almost coeval with Christianity in England. "It has everything that England has." Quite through its length and breadth runs "the river Trent, the calm and characteristic stream of middle England," which rises three miles north of the Five Towns, on the hill described by Arnold Bennett as "famous for its religious orgies," but more sympathetically remembered in the history of English Nonconformity as Mow Cop. On the western borders lie the romantic march lands of the Dee, the Severn and the Wye; on the north and west the Derbyshire Moors: on the south the forgotten battlefields and the strepitant modern factories of Worcestershire and Warwickshire. A man might dream a solitary life out in the contemplation of streams and moors, ten miles from Burslem.

Some of those natural phenomena are important to this critical exposition. Indeed, all details of every environment are important: it is not unworthy of remark (Arnold Bennett remarks it) that thirty miles of Watting Street run through Staffordshire: so long and fine are the threads of local life. But there is one whole section of the county which may be neglected as utterly by the critic as it is by the inhabitants of the Five Towns: the rural surroundings of that urban district. Nowhere in all Arnold Bennett's novels, nowhere in anything he records of any of his characters' minds, is the faintest trace of any appreciation or even any perception of scenery or "natural" beauty. So Lichfield and Trent, moor and meadow, may vanish from this survey like the fabric of fairyland; there shall be no green shades nor shining orchard peace nor Sunday calm in these pages—nothing but men and women and houses, and the fires that burn in all three.

If it were true that the real people of the Potteries (outside novels) care nothing for this quiet aspect of beauty, or for the ancient and generous past of Staffordshire as a whole—if that were true, and it may or may not be true—then there would still be no immediate ground for condemning their insensibility. It is a fugitive and cloistered aesthetic that shrinks from the dust and heat of modernity. The connection between romance and the nine-fifteen has become a commonplace, and, as Mr. Masefield has shown, it is possible to give a savage beauty to the most sordid bestialities of human nature in rural districts. A Five Towns passage which discovers the splendor that may lie in grime deserves to be taken from its context:

> “To the East is the wild grey-green moorland dotted with mining villages whose steeples are wreathed in smoke and fire. West and north and south are the Five Towns... Here they have breathed for a thousand years; and here to-day they pant in the fever of a quickened evolution, with all their vast apparatus of mayors and aldermen and chains

> of office, their gas and their electricity, their swift transport, their daily paper, their religions, their fierce pleasures, their vices, their passionate sports, and their secret ideals! Bursley Town Hall is lighting its clock—the gold angel over it is no longer visible—and the clock of Hanbridge Old Church answers; far off the blue arc lamps of Knype shunting yard flicker into being; all round the horizon, and in the deepest valley at Cauldon, the yellow fires of furnaces grow brighter in the first oncoming of the dusk. The immense congeries of streets and squares, of little houses and great halls and manufactories, of church spires and proud smoking chimneys and chapel towers, mingle together into one wondrous organism that stretches and rolls unevenly away for miles in the grimy mists of its own endless panting." (*Whom God hath Joined*, Chap. 1)

Such is the aspect of the Five Towns: a pillar of smoke by day, a pillar of fire by night. What wonder that one so full of the genius of place (a spirit of new towns no less than of old haunts of peace) should see always in such a pageant "the natural, beautiful, inevitable manifestation of the indestructible force that is within us"?

Upon the more minute features of this vast concourse of atoms Arnold Bennett has dealt with fullness and consistency. Any Five Townsman can recognize most of the places from the descriptions in his novels. In like manner, Five Townsmen can identify certain persons and events, especially in the short stories. It would not be discreet to give the actual names of the people. The important point is the fact of Arnold Bennett's fidelity to real life, or to phases of it.

He has, on the whole, followed the period as well as the place of his own life, but only a section of the Potteries' life. The people in the Five Towns novels belong to hardly a dozen families. Except in a few preliminary scenes here and there, they are all above the poorest class; they are the more or less prosperous tradesmen and minor professional men of a commercial center. Equally, they never form part of the upper or ruling classes. They are the middle class, plain and immitigable.

There are two words which Arnold Bennett constantly uses about them—"mentality" and "egotism". The first is, so to speak, his index of judgment—the creator's criterion of the created. The second is a quality objectively displayed by the persons, and not involving classification or judgment at all. The mentality of Darius Clayhanger might be called low but strong, of his son Edwin high but weak; both alike are egotists. On the whole, the Five Towns mentality, in the novels, is vigorous and coarse, and their egotism constant. But if you applied either term to the middle class of other authors, you would get very poor results. There would be plenty of idiosyncracy, but little real mentality. They would be egoists rather than egotists (a subtle but real difference—an egoist is conceited, an egotist merely self-centered). They would be surface types, collections of idioms, so to speak. The Five Townsmen are concentrated and genuine. They show little real or apparent hypocrisy. Their substance, as well as their appearance, is balanced and solid; they are enormously robust and aggressively self-respecting. They have a corporate and individual personality.

Further, as far as social values also are concerned, they are openly and avowedly middle class. They are self-satisfied as well as self-centered. They are flattered and fluttered by the intrusions of the Countess of Chell into their civic life; but they do not, on the whole, want to resemble or form a regular part of the society she frequents. In this connection the Five Towns show some of the high self-respect of the traditional English middle class, which perhaps has never really existed except in a few London merchants of about 1450.

Egotism, then, moral and social, is their predominant characteristic. It is a local condition, explained by local conditions. The Potteries refused railways at first. They had been engaged for countless generations in one single self-sufficing and prosperous craft. They preserved, therefore, without change, not merely their trade customs, but their personal manners. They were, until quite recent years, a piece of England walled off in the very heart of England. The motor and the railway have made great transformations; but until 1880 or a little later the Townsmen dwelt like the Albanians before the Turkish Revolution, who, when the Young Turks first prevailed, were observed to come from their hill fortresses, blinking, curious, armed with strange weapons, into a world, a social order, they had never seen.

I have exaggerated their actual isolation a little. But it is a real thing, at the root of many qualities displayed by Arnold Bennett and by the people in his books. They always think themselves right, for instance. They seldom allow for any other point of view than their own. Confronted with new or alien ideals and standards, they show a prickly defensiveness very difficult to overcome. They have never had the need for gentleness or amenity. The pot banks two or three generations ago—described with terrible force in Chapters IV and V of *Clayhanger*—were a ghastly battlefield, where no pity nor weakness found room to live. The Five Townsmen of 1860 to 1900, therefore, had no tradition of refinement either of spirit or of material intercourse. Instead, they had its converse, a high standard of comfort and efficiency, and the pride that goes with such a standard. Such pride never knows when it is legitimate and fine, when unseemly and ignoble.

Here the Five Towns, indeed, are upon strong native ground. If they are reproached with ugliness, they could answer that they are footmen in the army of a great king. They march in the ranks of an age long civilization. Their toil, unlovely by the elegant standards of Mediterranean humanity, makes the lives of other men more endurable and often more beautiful. English earthenware to-day (except its finest products) may not be satisfactory from an artistic point of view. But it is produced by a manual skill to the perfecting of which innumerable generations have gone. The civic accomplishment of Lichfield, that other civilization of Staffordshire, culminated in the swannery of Anna Seward; who shall say when pottery will cease? An ultimate and profound clash of ideals would be raised by the cry latent in any Five Townsman: “We made pots and pans here before ever a stone of Lichfield rose. We are the people of England. You are the imitators of Greece and Rome and Nazareth. Get you to Capri."

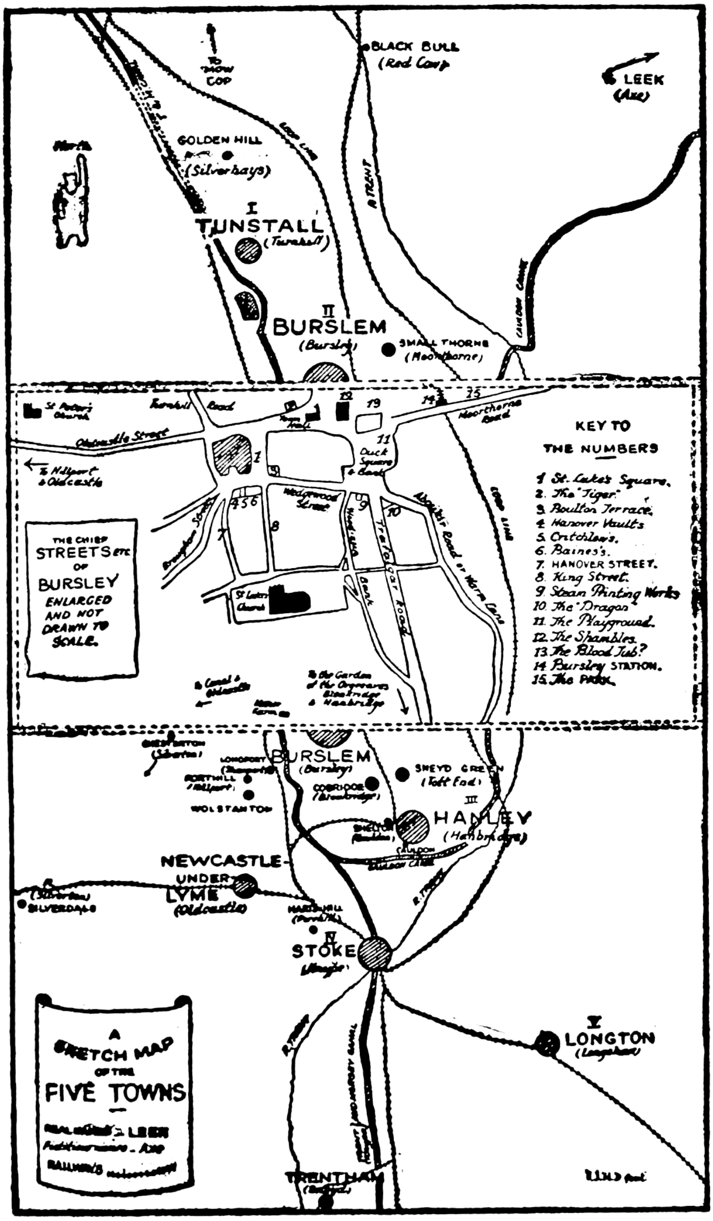
Finally—and here the Five Towns are linked to the greater world—the period connected with Arnold Bennett's life and work is one about which any generalization made firmly to-day may be friable to-morrow. He deals with the end of one urban epoch and the beginning of a new one. By 1880—his novels celebrate chiefly the three decades from that year onwards, especially the middle one—Victorian England was no longer Victorian. The effects of the Industrial System, the Reform Acts, the Forster Education Act, and the repeal of the Corn Laws coincided about that date to produce a new England which we, its sons, cannot yet see in perspective. Industrial life and its surroundings, sober-seeming before then, yet once, when it first rose upon the solid early Victorian foundations, apparently garish and ill-balanced, began to receive that fresh and vivid commercial quickening which we are apt to call, with some injustice to ourselves, American. Electricity rivalled steam; municipalities grew more corporate; comfort and wealth and population were doubled. To a man in that welter of the new Bursley the world must have been what Arnold Bennett says every good journalist finds it—interesting at every moment of life. “For the majority of people the earth is a dull place... The most numerous exceptions are lovers and journalists.” It is a characteristic result of his environment that a Five Townsman should never find life dull, and should believe himself unique in his cheery faith.

Let me here recapitulate the three elements in Arnold Bennett’s character as an artist. He is a Five Townsman—keen, interested, exceedingly shrewd, very practical and efficient, limited in certain directions, rather coarse-fibered in others. He is a trained manipulator of words. And he is highly strung, which means in spite of a most efficient self-control—indeed, as the result of it—he is always (whether he wishes it or not) expressing some aspect of his experience, opening some tiny window of his soul, speaking out (however faintly) some whisper of personality. You cannot be highly strung and not do so; the deeper your sensitivity and the more subtly you strive to hide yourself, the more truly you appear in your work—though everyone may not see you. Any doctor will tell you that the mask of a nervous patient is what betrays him. It is the same in literature. All good authors are "nervous"—though vain, dyspeptic, artistic or great hearted are usually the adjectives of diagnosis. The truth about an author will out, even when he denies it or disguises it.

Note On The Topography Of The Five Towns

It is possible to identify in detail most of the places in the Five Towns novels. Perhaps the attributions are not always exact, any more than in the case of Thomas Hardy's Wessex: but they are at any rate *vraisemblable*, if one allows for a few little discrepancies here and there, and local changes from time to time.

The fictitious names of the chief towns have already been mentioned. "Turnhill," "Bursley" and "Hanbridge" are those most frequently used, and of those three Bursley has the pre-eminence. In the mid-


TO MOW COP
BLACK BULL
(Red Cow)
LEEK
(Axe)
North
GOLDEN HILL
(Silverbays)
I
TUNSTALL
(Turnhill)
II
BURSLEM
(Bursley)
SMALL THORNE
(Moorthorne)
TRENT
CALDON CANAL
St Peter's Church
Turnhill Road
Town Hall
Oldcastle Street
To Hillport & Oldcastle
Duck Square & Bank
Moorthorne Road
Wedgwood Street
Brougham Street
St Luke's Church
Woodisun Bank
Trafalgar Road
Hillport Road or Warm Lane
To Canal & Oldcastle
To the Garden of the Orgreaves, Bleakridge & Hanbridge
THE CHIEF STREETS ETC OF BURSLEY ENLARGED AND NOT DRAWN TO SCALE.
KEY TO THE NUMBERS
1 St. Luke's Square.
2. The "Tiger."
3. Boulton Terrace.
4. Hanover Vaults
5. Critchlow's.
6. Baines's.
7. HANOVER STREET.
8. King Street.
9. Steam Printing Works
10. The "Dragon"
11. The Playground.
12. The Shambles.
13. The Blood Tub?
14. Bursley STATION.
15. The PARK
1 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15
BURSLEM
(Bursley)
CHESTERTON
(Silverton)
LONGPORT
PORTHILL
(Hillport)
WOLSTANTON
COBRIDGE
(Bleakridge)
SNEYD GREEN
(Toft End)
III
HANLEY
(Hanbridge)
SHELTON
CALDON CANAL
NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME
(Oldcastle)
SILVERDALE
HARTSHILL
IV
STOKE
(Knype)
R. TRENT
V
LONGTON
(Longshaw)
TRENTHAM
A SKETCH MAP OF THE FIVE TOWNS
LEER
RAILWAYS

dle of Bursley, in the market-place, stands (or stood till 1911) the Town Hall. Opposite is the Leopard Hotel (the "Tiger", famous for its barmaid). Here also is the Butcher's Market, or Shambles. The irregular space is a ganglion of streets. Eastwards runs Moorland Road ("Moorthorne Road") to Smallthorne ("Moorthorne"); north of this road lies the Borough Park, and streets ("Bycars Lane" and "Park Place") of no great importance except in *Helen with the High Hand* and *The Price of Love*. Bursley railway station is also here, and somewhere in the north-easterly region of the market-place once lay "the Blood Tub."

At the north-west corner of the marketplace debouches Liverpool Road ("Turnhill Road"); at the west, Newcastle Street ("Oldcastle Street"). Along Oldcastle Street, past the valley in which the Trent and Mersey ("Knype and Mersey") canal runs, lies the route to the fashionable suburb (really no suburb, but a separate parish) of Wolstanton ("Hillport" and "Porthill"—Newport, Longport and a real Porthill all are by the way). "Shawport" Station, in the valley, is Longport Station.

Turnhill Road and Oldcastle Street and the end of the market-place culminate, towards the south, in the most famous of all these haunts—St. John's ("St. Luke's") Square, where were the shops of the Baineses, the Poveys, Mr. Critchlow, Holl's, and the office of Denry Machin. Barnes's occupied most of the south side of the Square, which, like the north side, was split up by several roads. South-east stretched "Brougham Street" (which is more like Navigation Road than anything else). From the south-east angle Church Street ("King Street") ran down to the parish church of St. John, and from the same angle, almost due east, Queen Street ("Wedgwood Street") led to "Duck Square" and Waterloo Road ("Trafalgar Road"). The north-west corner of Wedgwood Street was called "Boulton Terrace"; here Daniel Povey murdered his wife.

The Duck Square region is a little obscure; apparently it is the rather shapeless little tract between Waterloo Road proper and the market-place, with a chapel, a school, and a playground on the eastern side. At its south end (on the south side of Wedgwood Street, that is) stood the Steam Printing

Works of Darius Clayhanger; Mr. Duncalf's office, first scene of the Card's activities, was also in the Square.

Here again is a ganglion of roads, the chief of them Waterloo ("Trafalgar") Road, the main trunk line between Hanbridge and Bursley. Where Trafalgar Road joined "Aboukir Road" or "Warm Lane" (Nile Street) stood the "Dragon", while exactly parallel to Trafalgar Road, for some distance, ran "Woodisun Bank".

The two Methodist chapels—Primitive and Wesleyan—are said to have been in King Street and Duck Bank respectively; but certain details here are incongruous with to-day's topography. The other Anglican Church, St. Paul's ("St. Peter's"), is a little distance due north-east of the market-place.

Follow now Trafalgar Road. Half-way along it, towards Hanbridge, is Cobridge, the residential suburb called "Bleakridge." Somewhere here—perhaps at the corner of Elm ("Oak") Road—stood the new house of the Clayhangers, next to the garden of the Orgreaves, magical grove of love. To the west is

George Farm ("Manor Farm"). Not far to the east of Cobridge is Sneyd Green ("Toft End"), the highest part of the Five Towns. And so to Hanbridge, whose central Square ("Crown Square"—Crown Bank is close to the Market Square) is yet another center of traffic. But Hanbridge is nowhere so lovingly and meticulously described as Bursley; the chief features were the Saracen's Head ("Turk's Head") and Bostock's and Brunt's stores, which also have real originals. The Cauldon Iron Works are to the south: sometimes they are undisguised, but more often "Cauldon" stands for Arnold Bennett's birthplace, Shelton.

Neither is Turnhill nor Knype of much importance. At Knype is the chief railway station, where George Fearns avoided his wronged wife; at Turnhill Hilda Lessways owned some cottage property. Harts Hill ("Pirehill"), site of the chief infirmary, lies between Knype and Oldcastle. Longshaw is hardly mentioned.

A few outlying districts are brought in. " Sneyd", home of the Countess of Chell, and a Sunday resort of bloods, is obviously Trentham, till recently the Duke of Sutherland's seat. Sneyd is a famous Staffordshire family and place name. "Manifold" and "Axe" are more difficult; each is ten miles from the Five Towns, and they may be meant for the same place. "Manifold" is "the metropolis of the moorlands," and that implies some town to the north or east. As a matter of fact, the real Manifold Valley, on the east, is a Five Towns pleasure resort—not a town. "Axe", also on the moors, is said in *The Price of Love* to be west of Hanbridge; but there are no moors in that direction. Leek, about nine miles to the northeast, on the Derbyshire border, and duly "north-east of Toft End," is the most likely original of this town, from which Sophia Baines ran away to marry Gerald Scales.

East of Oldcastle are a couple of villages which provide a portmanteau name—Silverdale + Chesterton = Silverton. North of Turnhill is Goldenhill ("Silverhays"); east is Chatterley, which is not disguised. "Red Cow" should be Black Bull, a railway station north-east of Turnhill.

CHAPTER 4

"Fantasias and Philosophies"

THE classification of his writings which Arnold Bennett afterwards adopted (he was either the first modern novelist or one of the first to invent such a valuable guide to his intentions) includes six headings—Novels, Fantasias, Short Stories, Belles-lettres, Drama and In Collaboration. The last section does not concern us much. Drama obviously requires a chapter to itself. Of the fourteen novels in the 1914 list, ten deal almost wholly with Five Towns life, as do practically all the short stories. They make up so large a portion of the author's work, they are so clearly his finest and most characteristic production, that they must be treated all together if their significance is to become plain. We are left, then, with a collection of non dramatic, non-Staffordshire works consisting of four "novels" (of which *A Man from the North* need not be reconsidered), six "fantasias" (a seventh, *The Gates of Wrath*, having been already discussed) and a number of "belles-lettres". It may seem that they form a heterogeneous crowd. As a matter of fact, they have a very distinct community of inspiration and execution. Versatile as Arnold Bennett is, he is no Proteus: there is something constant in everything he writes. All these works are different manifestations of a Five Towns democrat who was writing for a living.

Take the sensational novels first. They were not named "fantasias" fantastically. I take it that the title really conveys the author's opinion of the books. He perpetually shows devotion to music, and the word is probably, therefore, a metaphor from music. That is to say, these books are to be regarded as vivacious, skilful exercises upon certain central ideas in each case: exercises calling for high spirits, technical facility, and exuberance of ornament. They are not sonatas, operas, oratorios—not in Ercles' vein: but they are something more than frivolous improvisation—more responsible, more deliberately composed, written with a critical smile rather than a spontaneous laugh. You might say they were the handiwork of a literary "Card", showing off in a characteristically surprising manner.

That implies that there is a good deal of conscious and unconscious pretense about them. Arnold Bennett is as capable of pretense as any man. *The Truth About an Author* shows with serious mockery how he must have enjoyed writing his first fantasia, *The Gates of Wrath*, though he called it merely a serial in those days:

> "As an editor, I knew the qualities that a serial ought to possess. And I knew specially that what most serials lacked was a large, central, unifying, vivifying idea. I was very fortunate in lighting upon such an idea for my first serial. There are no original themes; probably no writer ever did invent an original theme;

> but my theme was a brilliant imposture of originality. It had, too, grandeur and passion, and fantasy, and it was inimical to none of the prejudices of the serial reader. In truth it was a theme worthy of much better treatment than I accorded to it."

That is the spirit of all the fantasias. They were all written for pleasure and for profit, motives indissolubly mingled. They are novels of ideas vigorously worked out, but not of great ideas. They deal each with a characteristic phenomenon of material civilization, raised to its highest power. It must be a phenomenon plain to the average man, but not fully and gloriously realized. The author takes it, and shows every conceivable splendor of it, and some inconceivable splendors as well. He brings in, in a grandiose spirit of intensive culture, every possible illustrative ornament. He adds profuse excitement, suddenness of transition, rapidity of movement, and a worldly, caustic humor. That is the whole prescription. In spite of the novelty of conception, however, and their agile modernity, the fantasias have all a defect of execution. For obvious reasons, the *dénouement* in sensational fiction should be delayed as long as possible. Arnold Bennett postpones his revelations deftly. But he invariably overcrowds his plot and so tangles the unfolding. The striking initial incident in each case appears to be the summit of his inspiration. He lavishes great care upon it, and then does not appear to trouble so much about what follows, so long as he can pile up sensations rapidly. The result is that the reader, by the end of the book, loses the simple faith which the opening scene always inspires. It is a curious weakness for so efficient a craftsman, and suggests that the labor of fantasia-making is irksome after the first impulse is spent. This defect is practically absent from the two novels written in collaboration with Eden Phillpotts.

The Ghost is also named a fantasia, but it differs from its fellows in dealing with the spiritual world, not the very material one of hotels and motors. It tells how a masterful peer loved an opera singer so fiercely that after his death his ghost could intervene in life: he became "a malign and jealous spirit, using his spectral influences to crush the mortals bold enough to love the woman whom he had loved on earth." It is, like "the speaking marble of the soul-subduing Chiggle," a work of the Elevated or Goblin School, in which the effort to be tremendous destroys the tremendousness.

Two further works are novels of emotion. *Sacred and Profane Love* has defects very similar in origin to those of *The Ghost*, but different in manner. It is written ostensibly in the first person by a Five Towns girl who was "a secret revolutionary." After a private course of forbidden literature, she "ceased to be ashamed of anything that I honestly liked." She honestly liked voluptuousness and rather promiscuous love ("sublime immodesty and unworldliness," she called it), so that her career was at any rate unusual. Her joy was to be "a self-constituted odalisque," "a pretty, pouting plaything," " a man's woman." Only in the moment of her death is there a hint of something deeper than the merest volatile sensuality.

Both these novels really suffer from insensibility to fine feeling and fine thinking. To name other novelists who do not shrink from facts, such books could not have been written, or rather, could not have been written so, by Mr. Masefield, or Mr. Conrad, or Mr. J. D. Beresford. I do not mean that their author lacks subtlety. Arnold Bennett is infinitely and splendidly subtle when he is working upon Five Towns material, and he is occasionally subtle also in these minor novels. But his intellect and his spirit and his literary sense alike (so far as they are revealed in his books) are inadequately tempered to fine issues. It is not unjust to the democracy of true emotion to say that the lofty joys and victories and defeats of the soul cannot be expressed in low words: in words, that is, rubbed smooth or defaced by usage. Neither can the mind triumph coarsely, for it is not then the mind but the animal brain answering, virtually, to a physical stimulus.

This crudity of sexual and psychical emotion in Arnold Bennett is emphasized by certain points in *The Glimpse*. This, by some aberration of the practical journalist, was offered to *Black and White* (now dead) as a short story. The editor justly boggled at it, and Arnold Bennett decided it deserved to be a novel, not a short story. So a novel it is: the embryo is embalmed in *The Matador of the Five Towns* under the same title.

In *The Glimpse* all the weaknesses of the Five Towns idealist are sadly, even pathetically, manifest. It is hard to believe that, when he wrote it, its author did not think it a metaphysical or psychical document of genuine value. It is equally hard not to laugh at it. Briefly, it tells how a man of the well-to-do middle class apparently died, had a vision of the after life, and returned to this present mediocre world. It may be said at once that the three other imaginative treatises on the same subject in modern English literature—Browning's *Epistle of Karshish*, Evelyn Underbill's *Grey World*, and H. G. Wells's short story, *Under the Knife*—are so far above *The Glimpse* that if it is to be read at all they must be forgotten. They suggest a spiritual world, a "world" in which personality, pure and simple, persists in a manner compatible with some hard struggle to conceive what personality really is. *The Glimpse* merely offers the crude metaphors of spiritualism visualized, with no added profundity of thought. Arnold Bennett is not, in matters like this, a scientist: he cannot, as H. G. Wells does, suggest the continuity of obscure “physical” forces which would give plausibility to a bare assertion. Nor is he a metaphysician like Miss Underbill.

I am loth to dwell on such a failure as this. But I must add that it is a complete failure in detail. It contains provincialisms which make it impossible to accept the chief man and woman at their alleged London value. The “astral” scenes are written in a style of exuberant Latinity which would put a botanist to shame. The conception of woman formulated is Victorian-Turkish; and a man’s sense of humor must be temporarily in abeyance when he lets himself write of a female soul-form that “the woman I had created... was only an ineffable extension of my egoism.”

The extension of Arnold Bennett’s egoism in these three very unfortunate books is an adventure upon ground unsuited to a character so trained and so temperamentally disposed. These are novels based upon emotion rather than experience, and emotion is the best of servants, the worst and least stable of masters. The peculiarity of Arnold Bennett's genius is that it is at its highest when it is most severely controlled. In these books it is mere caprice—a caprice not consonant with its owner's experience of life and capacity for letters.

The two remaining novels, on the other hand, are marred by no ill-equipped extravagance. They are virtually fantasias in conception, but novels by their deeper reality. *Buried Alive* is a genuine comedy, written with a humorous acidity which only in one scene is remote from minute and thoughtful observation. *A Great Man*—"a frolic"—shows the same powers of comic observation, applied not only to the business side of literature but also to the psychological state of authorship. It is almost a fictitious appendix to *The Truth About an Author*.

A slight jejuneness of social observation may be mentioned here. It leads Arnold Bennett now and then to use the same details more than once. For example, he employs precisely the same image, and almost exactly the same words, in *The Honeymoon*, of Mrs. Beach Haslam, the talented novelist, and in *Buried Alive*, of Priam Farll. There are several instances of the practice: perhaps the most noticeable is the employment twice over of a description of a paintress's work—in *Anna of the Five Towns* and in a short story. Of course it is no vital defect of genius. It simply suggests a certain pigeon-holedness of mind which is the danger of efficiency.

Now all the novels dealt with in this chapter are, so to speak, pastimes: experiments, efforts at self-expression, which Arnold Bennett made concurrently with his more deliberate work upon his native raw material. It must be taken as a self-evident proposition that the Five Towns novels are far higher achievements. These works are merely clever. At the same time, the "highly-strung pride" of the author crops up in them—in the *flair* for a surprising situation, the evident enjoyment of it; in the desperate earnestness of the assertion of his own beliefs—beliefs upon matters, as I have said, alien to his temperament; in the quiet detachment of the humor. The "Philosophies" show the processes of observation and self-training and experience which were going on behind the experiments. Arnold Bennett tried, in these novels, to suit public taste—to supply a market. To that end, he trained his mind, he learnt his trade, he formulated his ideals (or some of them) in very distinct words. He arrived at a gospel of mental and moral and practical efficiency which he had hitherto been following without writing it down. The pocket philosophies contain it.

They appear in England under a handicap. Expressing the view that life is earnest, they are labelled as though they proclaimed that life is humbug. On their wrappers appears the language of what used to be called advertisement: it is now publicity. One book, for instance, is said to contain "big, strong, vital thinking... thoughts that make a man reach up to his highest self. For many a reader a chance encounter with this book may be the first step on the road to success." Somehow, successful men always claim the best of both worlds... However, "big, strong, vital thinking" is just what these remarkable little books do not contain. They contain the completest common-sense, expressed with astonishing simplicity and directness, and based upon unimpeachable honesty of outlook. They are a guide to efficiency, to self-help, to practical idealism, to alertness of intelligence, to sinewy culture, to every high quality which every person who sets out to advise the crass Briton has always thought the crass Briton does not show. The United Kingdom is quick with the instinct of mind-molding, and almost overstocked with agencies for the purpose, from the physical energies of Mr. Sandow to the benevolent writings of the late Lord Avebury. Where Arnold Bennett's handbooks to *The Reasonable Life* differ from the scores of books and lectures and charts with similar aims is in economy, clearness, and comprehensiveness of language. They are quite perfect lay sermons. But they are not original.

The remaining aspects of his philosophy are revealed more obliquely in *Paris Nights* and *Those United States*, where he appears as what he is professedly anxious not to seem—a typical Englishman. He is detached, humorous, self-depreciating: he knows and explains how much better many foreign customs and achievements are than their counterpart in England. But he can help, no more than a

Times leader-writer, a carefully suppressed sense of patronage.

The chief notes of travel in these two books, on the whole, are practical—concerned with manners and facilities rather than ideals. But they show, much more than, for instance, the handbooks, and more than most of the novels, how wide is their author's range of knowledge and experience. If he chose to write in a style of forcible allusiveness, like Mr. Kipling, Arnold Bennett would be famous for his recondite technical learning. Because his method is silent, not emphatic, his curious lore seems to be merely careful photography. He has assimilated as well as catalogued.

In *Liberty* and the articles in *The Daily News* during the winter of 1914-15 he is more outspokenly and obviously English. But here, again, he shows his personal qualities—his clearheadedness, his thoroughness, and his passionate democratic conviction.

There is a sincerity in all his practicalness. In the war essays it is perhaps clearer because the subject is greater. But he is just as fully convinced and in earnest when he suggests hours for the reading of good literature, half-hours of concentrated thought, careful study of a particular art, and so on. When he turns his practical gifts on to the concoction of fantasias, the sincerity may seem to diminish or even to disappear: the psychology of literary composition certainly helps to obscure it. Yet it is still there, in the shape of an immense interest in civilization—a lively inquisitiveness and keenness and self-confidence. The fervor, the bustle, the desire to do something and not to rest, which animates the Five Towns, animates Arnold Bennett. So does the Five Towns' firm conviction that all men are equal, and all entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. So, at times, does the not-always-lofty Five Towns' conception of what happiness and life are, and their perfectly legitimate readiness to sell, as books, any views formed upon such subjects.

CHAPTER 5

"The Five Towns Novels"

IN the preface to a re-issue of his greatest book, Arnold Bennett lays bare, consciously and unconsciously, certain secrets of his art. I have said that he deliberately became a writer, and that, however deliberate a man may be, he must reveal himself willy-nilly. This is how he set about writing *The Old Wives' Tale*. He used to see, at a restaurant in Paris, a young and pretty waitress, heedless of him, and a less pleasing one who wanted him for her own. They were to him, one would think, an epitome of life. One day a plain, elderly lady entered, and appeared, to unthinking persons, ridiculous. The pretty waitress laughed at her. Arnold Bennett, from whom, for all his humor, the tears of human things are not hidden, saw in the absurd woman "a heart-rending novel". She had once been young and had grown old, had developed "from a young girl into a stout old lady." He resolved to write that novel. But he saw that if he was going to write about an ordinary woman, she must not be singular or ridiculous: she must "pass unnoticed in a crowd," because "the whole modern tendency of realistic fiction is against oddness in a prominent figure."

So *The Old Wives' Tale* was inspired. It fulfilled its inspiration. But at the risk of seeming irrelevant, I must add other details. Arnold Bennett had already, in 1903, planned a novel about a woman of forty (*Leonora*). He had long regarded Guy de Maupassant's *Une Vie* as a supreme novel, but he meant to go beyond *Une Vie*, or at any rate to go as far. *The Old Wives' Tale* was a deliberately vast undertaking. In fact, it was too vast for accomplishment at first. "For several years I looked my project squarely in the face at intervals, and then walked away to write novels of smaller scope, of which I produced five or six." The book was eventually begun in 1907, and finished in 1908. It was not all the cold-blooded, joyless thing it was meant to be. Sophia, the beautiful sister, was added. "Constance was the original [heroine]; Sophia was created out of bravado, just to indicate that I declined to consider Guy de Maupassant as the last forerunner of the deluge."

There is the anatomy of authorship. The book began in a great idea. It carried out the idea after a long time, and with an addition. In the meanwhile, the Five Towns democrat wrote for a living, just as nine authors out of ten cannot fail to write. I have just criticized those "novels of smaller scope." Consider now what the larger scope of the Five Towns novels means.

And, first of all, observe that Arnold Bennett explicitly acknowledges the influence of de Maupassant. He says that "in the nineties we used to regard *Une Vie* with mute awe": he identifies the formative epoch thus clearly. He ranges himself with those who, like him, first attained fame, or at any rate attention, in *The Yellow Book*. Now the epoch immediately preceding Arnold Bennett's apprenticeship to literature, though it abbreviated the circumstances, liked to point its moral just as neatly and plainly as did the epoch of Dickens and Thackeray:

> "Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing, and emasculate."— Robert Louis Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits*.

Novels were outwardly sleek and rounded, like a pigling of Epicurus' herd. The age of Yellerbocky, on the other hand, was learning its craft mainly from France, and despised both Victorian happinesses and late-Victorian mechanical skill. It went to another extreme, and left the rounding-off at the end to the sympathetic imagination of the reader—not seldom before he had contrived to understand the beginning. From the two strains of art (both, of course, still persisting), but chiefly from the French, sprang a third, of which many novelists of to-day—Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett, sometimes H. G. Wells, and most of the younger writers—are practitioners. It is French, with a difference—French in artistic conception, English in thorough and laborious execution. In its products a central idea or a central tract of life focuses great masses of detail.

English fiction, in fact, since, roughly speaking, 1900, has shown a new breadth and courage. Often, it is true, a promising writer reveals that he has not sufficient spaciousness or steadiness of experience to live up to his ambitions. But the spirit of a fresh impulse is there. It might be urged, not without a great deal of truth, that the impulse is but a vital quickening of old ashes partially quenched—a return to the largeness of Dickens and Thackeray, and of Fielding and Richardson still farther back. Certainly to-day's novels have the same long vision and wide range of treatment. But the great novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were class novels, written from a class point of view. Dickens, for all his liberalism, could neither draw a gentleman nor refrain from trying to do so. Thackeray, for all his profound humanity, could draw nothing but men and women bound hand and foot by caste—gentlemen or their inferiors. In the new school there is neither high nor low. Nor is there a necessary beginning or end, except the beginning of birth and the end of death. The characteristic achievement is controlled mass. A modern novel is like a modern battle. A thousand circumstances vibrate and vanish, sometimes with little apparent inter-connection. So vivid and real are the details that often they, and not the whole movement, linger in the memory. Even at the "end" the result may be vague. But the reader and the novelist have taken part in a battle of the soul. They have seen life together, and the reader, willy-nilly, has had to face what the author decrees to be reality. There is no ease here; letters are no longer the adornment of a graceful existence, nor fiction the recreation of a mind unbent. There is also no judgment upon life by the voice of old and honorable tradition; novelists are no longer the highest and most generous product of a classical education, nor the vigorous progeny of a sentimental nationalism. They are men—the biological summit of the ages. Science, in fact, has invaded fiction by coloring, imperceptibly but indelibly, the minds of those who reflect at all. Novels to-day are a chemical analysis of life, which is a compound of emotions, impressions and volitions.

How far, then, do the Five Towns novels achieve the ideal of *Une Vie*? How far are they "realistic fiction" of the modern type? Let us follow Aristotle's method, and take first the mean or perfect example, and afterwards the defects and the excesses.

The Old Wives' Tale appears, to a cursory glance, a formless chronicle; it is in reality a miracle of constructive genius and eclectic self-restraint. It is easily described as the lives of two women born in Bursley just before 1850, daughters of the great draper of St. Luke's Square. One married her father's manager and continued to possess and control the shop, until she retired in favor of her chief assistant. The other, Sophia, married a flashy scoundrel, who deserted her in Paris a little before the siege; she, too, came back to Bursley to die. And that is the whole story, in a sense. It is the whole story of many lives;

youth, marriage, the inexorable swift passage of the devouring years, adhesion to a place, death. Arnold Bennett tells it in such a manner that he never comments upon the two old wives; he never criticizes the society in which they live; he never dwells upon any figure or thing in such a way that it stands out disproportionately from its environment; his own opinions, his sequence of ideas, his arrangement of the successive incidents, are wholly concealed. The book is just a chronicle, told with such profound art, such equableness and perfection of construction, that it might be written by some spirit in another world a thousand years hence.

A man who can thus set down the pages of change that make up the continuous book of existence, who can withhold himself from a-philosophy of what he tells so austerely, who can excite pity with the use of never a pitiful word, is a great novelist. There is no English novel quite like T*he Old Wives' Tale*. Its apparently endless succession of small prosaic things is a sustained effort of imagination all the more remarkable because there is no imagination visible in the plain tale. The book reflects all the breadth and the narrowness, all the strength and impotence of the English middle class; of England, perhaps. In spite of our sentiment—the sentimentality despised by Bernard Shaw—there is a curious foundation of steady hard pessimism in the English character, and a still steadier endurance; both hopelessly inarticulate. Our flippant optimism of speech, and our reluctance to face any moral question fairly and squarely, are the mask of a grim distrust of life. “He had once been young, and he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Everything came to that.”

In no other of his novels has Arnold Bennett reached the same height of passionless austerity. Even *Clayhanger* and its companion, *Hilda Lessways*—two out of a promised three installments of the life of a young, sensitive, timid Five Townsman and the highly-strung girl whom he is eventually to marry—even these two books are not quite on the same plane as *The Old Wives' Tale*, fine though they are. *Clayhanger*, indeed, is written from the outside. But it is written by one plainly tolerant and amused, not dispassionate and far away. It has the defect of personal intrusion by the author. *Hilda Lessways* is much more objective. But it is impossible to consider either of these novels as a whole, or to praise them as judiciously as they deserve, until the promised conclusion is published. When it appears, it will be seen whether the complete trilogy is also a steadfast and entire work. Edwin and Hilda have yet to endure the slow menace of the years.

It may be interpolated here, as a piece of literary intelligence, that *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways*—the one, so to speak, a concurrent sequel to the other—are not coterminous, nor anything like it. *Hilda Lessways* stops at the end of Book II (there are four books in all) of *Clayhanger*. The promise of continuance made in 1910 has therefore not been exactly kept. It is an interesting point in purpose and achievement.

The isolation of the author's personality from his subject is better seen in *Anna of the Five Towns*, a work often underrated, and of very high value. Its weaknesses are a certain lack of control over the digressions (an imperfect welding—it was the author's first novel of large "scope") and what would in a lesser book be a virtue—a dramatic plot, which shows a tendency to let action dominate psychology too conveniently. I will not survey the book in detail. It is a study of three characters, virtually. In the conclusion, in particular, the abstinence from compassion and the utter simplicity of language excite pity more forcibly than any emphasis could. *Leonora*—the story of a woman of charm and fine character married to a specious rogue—is a work of distinction on much the same level as *Anna of the Five Towns*, and subject to the same criticism. *Whom God hath Joined* has the defects of both the modern and the Victorian novel. It looks at first sight like a polemical tract on divorce and its anomalies; but as a matter of fact it presents two well-balanced but not wholly typical divorce cases, and the real issue is the effect of the Divorce Court, with its odious publicity, on the persons concerned, more especially on a pure young girl. It is neither entirely dramatic (not a story, that is), nor entirely realistic. It suffers from a certain unevenness of execution and irresolution of aim, though it contains some remarkable passages.

The Price of Love, from a technical point of view, is admirably constructed, but not dispassionate enough. In scope, it is almost an artistic relapse. It is a particular, not a universal, book. It is a minute study of five people, and chiefly of one of the five, a girl of the lower middle class who married a rogue and only gradually discovered that he was a rogue. On every page the author is clearly enthusiastic; he is intensely interested in every shade of feeling, every reaction to stimulus, every logical foundation of emotions obscure and dumb. He has never shown a surer mastery than in the picture of Rachel's attitude to Mrs. Maldon and the abominable Batchgrew, of her quarrel with Louis, of Louis's brief glimpse deep into his own mean soul when he is found out. But the author's attitude in the book is not objective. He is not recording life, but some lives; the only vision he gives is of a particular instance of the eternal loyalty of woman. His power of observation is as true as ever, and even more acutely comprehensive; the nature of his subject itself tends to narrow his philosophy for the time.

I can say nothing in detail of the three volumes of short stories (*Tales of the Five Towns*, *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, and *The Matador of the Five Towns*). They support every criticism, favorable or unfavorable. Their variety is very striking. They range from mere tabloid melodramas to little transcripts from life, from neat, smooth comedies to unspoiled tragedy. They suffer more than the novels from Arnold Bennett's want of verbal imagination: they gain more than the novels from his indifference to bright colors and his economy of words.

So far, then, Arnold Bennett is seen to have tried, and tried more successfully than not, to set down his vision of life without explicitly adding his views of it—to chronicle soberly, seriously, things as they are, allowing local conditions to create their own atmosphere; for, prosaic, detailed, photographic as they may seem, the Five Towns novels are full of atmosphere. It is curious to notice the nearly parallel experience, and the utterly different craftsmanship, of H. G. Wells. He too knew drapers' shops and the middle class; he took advice from Mr. Lewis Hind; he even describes the Five Towns, in *The New Machiavelli*; but except for some little ornamental accidents, he writes as an Englishman, as a set-scene novelist working from a beginning through a middle to an end, and as an outside critic of an existing order rather than its mouthpiece. He is not an egotist.

There remain, however, three Five Towns novels uncriticized, and a passage from the already quoted preface not illustrated. Arnold Bennett inserted Sophia in *The Old Wives' Tale* "out of bravado". He wrote, one cannot help thinking, these three novels—*Helen with the High Hand*, *The Card*, and *The Regent*—from the same motive: they are at least *bravura*.

Two of them need not be discussed at any length. *Helen with the High Hand* (1910) tells how a formidable young woman made her formidable uncle go into Five Towns society and buy a large house, and how both she and the uncle were married eventually to suitable persons. It is a jocular performance, amusing when one can forget the intrinsic vulgarity of nature and manners of the characters; the author seems to regard them as charming to other people as well as to their own circle. That is one of Arnold Bennett's inherent weaknesses—that he often assumes, or appears to assume, that the world at large would regard the society of the Five Towns as that society regards itself. *The Regent* (1913) is a sequel to *The Card*, and is an account of how its hero, by impudence, shrewdness, luck and sometimes something very like dishonesty, indulged in a theatrical venture and conquered London as he had already conquered the Five Towns. It is full of diversion; but it suffers seriously from the fact that the London characters are hopelessly superficial and unrealized, in contrast to the living and breathing Five Townspeople. Both novels are essentially Victorian in treatment—fantasias, in effect, but locally realistic.

The Card is also really a fantasia. But it is something else as well. It is what painters used to call "The Portrait of a Gentleman"—a picture, that is, of someone whom they regarded as at least admirable. *The Card* is a very disturbing book. The man who could write it is a complete master of technique. It is episodic, but perfectly constructed, and the manner of it exquisitely suited to the humor of the conception. Ironic commercialism, the crafty triumphs of an alert, yet unconscious, financial genius, have never been so vivaciously and faithfully rendered. Nor is an occasional gentleness lacking. The disturbing features are two—that the Card himself is presented as the pride and fine flower of Five Towns life, and that Arnold Bennett also must be strongly suspected of admiring him. Now Denry Machin, a successful Five Towns financier, was something very like a robber. He began by falsifying his marks at school; and the author justifies it by saying that Denry was "not uncommonly vicious. Every schoolboy is dishonest, by the adult standard." He proceeded to tamper with his employer's papers, to act as an unregistered moneylender (at five hundred and twenty per cent. per annum—threepence a week on each half-crown), to break off an engagement by deliberate and cheap rudeness, and to bribe a footman to cause an opportune carriage accident. In fact, he possessed the business instinct in the highest degree, and his impulsiveness was sharpened to the finest point of slyness.

It would be foolish to insist that the chief character in a book must be conventionally good or moral, and, except when the thing becomes a dangerous cult, as it does sometimes in novels of crime, there is no reason on earth why roguery should not be treated either realistically or amusingly. Denry Machin is a very amusing person indeed, and by normal standards of dishonesty only mildly dishonest; the Llandudno scenes in particular are a joy. The trouble is that neither the novelist nor what he represents as Five Towns opinion even suspects the Card of falling below the average English level of honesty.

Except Edwin Clayhanger, Denry Machin is Arnold Bennett's most completely and carefully studied male character; and he is, on a census of the persons in these novels, a more typical Five Townsman than Clayhanger. Here is a table of all the important young Five Townsmen created by Arnold Bennett. It is a startling document. Of course, a "hero" need not be heroic. But this census almost suggests that honesty is the worst policy, to be followed only by timid or repellent dullards. There are many similar portraits in the short stories, but they

Novel	Person	Character	Position
Clayhanger	Edwin Clayhanger	Timid, thoughtful	Printer
,,	Willie Orgreaves	Decent, lively	Doctor
Hilda Lessways	George Cannon	Bigamous, dishonest	Speculator
Whom God hath Joined	Lawrence Ridware	Decent, timid	Solicitor
,,	Mark Ridware	Decent, lively, artistic	Artist
,,	George Fearns	Liar, adulterous	Solicitor
The Price of Love	Louis Fores	Liar, thief	Pottery-maker
,,	Julian Maldon	Thief, puritan, uncouth	,,
The Old Wives' Tale	Gerald Scales	Dishonest, adulterous	Commercial traveller
,,	Samuel Povey	Honest, plodding	Draper
,,	Cyril Povey	Slack, shifty, specious	Artist
,,	Dick Povey	Honest, alert	Motor-maker
The Card	Edward Henry Machin	Sharp, humorous, untruthful	Financier, commission agent
Anna of the Five Towns	Henry Mynors	Pushing, hearty, rather hard	Pottery-maker
,,	Willie Price	Timid, oppressed, forger	,,
Leonora	John Stanway	Dishonest, able, flashy	,,
Helen with the High Hand	Andrew Dean	Honest, rather uncouth	,,
,,	Emanuel Prockter	Showy, snobbish, apparently foolish	,,

would not affect appreciably any generalization based upon the above list. There are also many minor young gentleman, the Swetnams, the Etches, the Clayton Vernons, and others, of whom we are told little more than that they delight in fine raiment and the ostentation of wealth; a disposition not peculiar to the Five Towns.

Consider also—in order to gauge how far realism and bravado clash in these works— the general society described in them. The Five Towns young man, in addition to showing the qualities already tabulated, is cheaply and inadequately educated. He is first and foremost practical, which means, as a rule, that he hates long views, scientific technical knowledge, and careful organization. He is for a considerable time in utter subservience to the older generation. His chief aim in life is to get money; to dress and behave smartly; to marry, but not always to be pedantically monogamous. He has few standards of conduct; he is sharp, and his sharpness is of the kind which breaks the spirit, not the letter, of the law. He has no sanction of restraint except the fear of consequences. He visits Llandudno or Man in August and behaves in the manner of a specious "nut"; sometimes he attains Brighton; nowhere else in England is he at home. He drinks to a comfortable extent, goes to Association football matches, and is generally of a brisk and knowing demeanor. He knows life; but it is difficult not to feel that his knowledge, like that of the young gentleman detained in Mr. Namby's office, has been gained "through the dirty panes of glass in a bar door."

Growing older, prospering, and wriggling out of the constriction of the paternal rule, he begins to drive a dog-cart. He becomes a member of a club; and perhaps there is no more ignoble place on earth than the professional and trade club of a provincial town. Aesthetic tastes develop slightly; in particular, he is genuinely and profoundly musical, and, with an abundance of boorish directness, plays duets of classical music. He may collect books; pictures, never. He may even learn something of the history, traditions, and aspirations of the potter's craft. On the other hand, he may juggle insecurely with finance, and tamper with the purity of his home. In fact, when Arnold Bennett writes of "the average sensual man," he means, if his "heroes" are any criterion, "the sensual average man". Of course he happens to be able to draw nasty men with peculiar skill and fullness, so that the evil they do lives disproportionately in the memory. But there are only six Five Townsmen in the census whom he has invested at once with virtue and a certain charm: Edwin Clayhanger and his friend "the Sunday," Mr. Orgreaves, Dick Povey, Mark Rid ware and Willie Price (a forger, it is true, but with the strongest extenuating circumstances). Denry Machin is virtuous, but not charming. All the rest are low, or mean, or flashy, or hard, or stuffy; but they are not all criminal. They are merely business men; bearded, rather hot, piggy-eyed, pushing, often horribly efficient, or else rather cringing, or rather sharp, or unconsciously hypocritical.

That is to-day's generation. Their fathers were singularly prone to become widowers early in life, and afterwards to develop all the least desirable traits of puritanism: utter, relentless strictness, domestic tyranny, oppression of rivals, vile manners, hatred of ideas and ideals. Fortunately, they usually had a stroke in late middle age, and became harrowingly helpless. At such an opportunity, the chief son or daughter seized and used the fallen scepter.

These old men of Arnold Bennett's, indeed, are a nightmare. Darius Clayhanger, Eli Boothroyd, Ephraim Tellwright, Batchgrew, John Baines, Critchlow, Eli Machin, old Brunt—there is not one who is not ignorant and cruel, domineering and boorish, physically nauseating and socially nonexistent. And yet they are powerful figures, not unworthy of respect; hard men facing a hard world proudly.

The female differs, and is on the whole more pleasing. She seems to fulfil one or other of two implied natural laws—that woman is the plaything, the adored plaything of man, often broken, or that she is the huntress, generally successful but always pursuing, with the arts of allurement and victorious concession highly developed.

The men in Arnold Bennett's books enjoy themselves in their way; I cannot recall one of his women who is really happy, except perhaps the delightfully drawn Mrs. Button in *Anna of the Five Towns*. Their nearest approach to joy is humorless acceptance of comfort. The middle class is still predominantly Victorian in the habits of life; and the women have to be domestic, whether aggressively or receptively, whether hunter or hunted. They have, like the men, their own freemasonry. The men know their own vices, and never give one another away.

The women never give away to the men their universal tolerant perception of male weakness.

Such is the society of that remarkable district of England, and so do the egotism and mentality of Arnold Bennett unite to picture it. He rises above his subject in the better part of all these novels, and entirely in *The Old Wives' Tale*; he identifies himself with it, takes its aggressive, defiant point of view, sinks with it, in other parts, chiefly when he achieves humor. Now recall again *The Card*. It, or rather its hero, has one quality I have not dwelt upon yet. Demy's chief characteristic is what Hobbes calls laughter: "Sudden glory, the passion which is caused by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them"; and glory is an "exultation of the mind, arising from imagination of a man's own power and ability." An irresistible splendor and inspiration carry Denry on, while at the same time he is able to perceive his "own power and ability". The quality is not exactly vanity, nor is it exactly the conscious use of strength; it is midway between—a sort of overmastering, clear-headed humor. It is a quality displayed (I write in a purely Pickwickian sense) by Arnold Bennett himself. It is an inherent Quinturban gift. He is liable at any moment to seize an inspiration and (mentally) glory in it, feeling his power and indulging it with a freakish wilfulness; a most human frailty. Thackeray, I think, is said to have exclaimed upon his own success in writing a certain passage; Fielding, I am sure, must have felt sudden glory at moments in *Jonathan Wild*; Sterne is a perpetual Card. Arnold Bennett has given the Five Towns term to a larger world, and must himself be named by it. The union of impersonal strength and personal bravado in Arnold Bennett, in fact, is his most characteristic trait. It makes it, however, very difficult to assess his outlook upon life justly. If we had not *The Old Wives' Tale*, and certain passages in *Clayhanger*, and the conclusions of *Anna of the Five Towns* and *The Price of Love*, the verdict would be hopelessly unfair. It would convict Arnold Bennett of knowingly accepting the egotistical, self-assertive, unlovely ideals of a community wholly commercial in thought and deed. In fact, one side of that community's existence is so far obscured by its commercial activity that Arnold Bennett fails to give it reality. He takes no account of what is still a powerful thing in middle-class life—religion in one form or another. Wesleyanism is the Five Towns form. Arnold Bennett never understands it; it is as alien to his temperament— or at any rate to his artistic temperament—as love of natural beauty. He can describe vividly the frenzy of a revival; he does so in *Anna of the Five Towns*, with minuteness and outward accuracy. But compare such "passages with the description in Harold Frederic's *Illumination*, (Published in America as *The Damnation of Theron Ware*) or the spirit of them with the spirit of "Mark Rutherford"; the Five Towns scenes have no life, no feeling for the underlying reality and torment of soul. However superficial a religion may be, it is the framework of some sort of philosophy of existence in those who hold to it. It is a defect of sympathy in Arnold Bennett that he does not appreciate that philosophy; or if he does, does not deal with it in a series of novels which covers almost every other aspect of the middle class. But the ignoble half of life, happily, is not Arnold Bennett's chief or sole preoccupation. He has become, by taking thought, a great novelist in regard to technique.

He can, moreover, see life steadily and whole, as all great novelists must; even though he turns Card now and then and plays with it. He has also an individual gift which sets him apart from other novelists—his extraordinary power of analysis. Henry James is the supreme living possessor of such a power. He has paid a high tribute to Arnold Bennett. But his own power is differently applied; it is intellectual rather than concrete. Very seldom does Arnold Bennett show his characters as searching their own souls. He shows what is much more profoundly true than any amount of introspection—that the middle class are incapable of searching their own souls; that Five Townsmen (like most Englishmen) act upon a balance of considerations, but seldom think the considerations out; that impulse and inhibition are for ever struggling on the surface; that action is character, and character, in people like these, is only the habitual, inveterate surface of an imperfectly exercised mind.

It is, then, as a Five Townsman that Arnold Bennett uses his genius, and it is upon the material of the Five Towns middle class that he works most happily. But just because he has genius he rises far above local conditions; and just because he is a Five Townsman he enjoys himself thoroughly—not least when he is privately laughing at those who would like him to do otherwise—in flouting the social and even the literary standards of persons born and bred in less favored regions.

CHAPTER 6

"Stage Plays"

THE plays by Arnold Bennett which have as yet been produced are *Cupid and Commonsense* (produced in 1908), *What the Public Wants* (1909), *The Great Adventure* (1911; not produced in London till 1913); *The Honeymoon* (1911); and (in collaboration) *Milestones*. His three *Polite Farces for the Drawing Room* were published as a book in 1899.

"My aim in writing plays," he affirmed in 1900, "whether alone or in collaboration, has always been strictly commercial I wanted money in heaps, and I wanted advertisement for my books."

It is only to be expected, in such circumstances, that the *Polite Farces* should not be works of genius. Nor are they worthy of consideration as works of art. There are three of them, and they are all three purely mechanical. Emotions change in them with the rapidity and slickness peculiar to farce, where a door has but to slam to alter any train of causation. The dialogue has the stilted gentlemanliness also peculiar to farce of the drawing-room type; the English middle class has always been prone to think periphrasis the highest form of wit. *The Polite Farces*, in fact, are in no way representative of "the intelligent imaginative writer" whom, in the preface to his first-produced play, Arnold Bennett demands for the modern English theater. They are not intelligent and they are not imaginative. They are effective in an entirely conventional way.

Their belated successor, *Cupid and Commonsense*, was produced by the Stage Society. It is a dramatic version of *Anna of the Five Towns*, with, however, a very different ending. The names are all altered from those in the novel, but the events and even some of the dialogue are the same up to the end of the third act. The fourth act is very instructive. Eli Boothroyd (Ephraim Tellwright of the novel) has forced his daughter Alice (Anna) to oppress Willie Beach (Willie Price) and his father, who owed her money. Beach *père*, like Price *père*, committed suicide; Willie went to America. There the third act ends, at the point where the novel ends. The predominant crisis of the play (thitherto) and the book—the ultimate rebellion of the repressed, timid girl against her hard, tyrannical father—has been fully developed. Willie has been shown as a weak, helpless, honest, pathetic boy, of whom it would not be unreasonable to expect the sudden tragic despair and resolution which ends his life in the novel But in Act IV. of the play he comes back to England happy and prosperous, with an American wife (they are faintly like Sam and his wife in *Milestones*)—"no longer miserable, and so objectionable." Eli Boothroyd meanwhile has had a stroke (that favorite Five Towns catastrophe), and is a pitiable, impotent doll The interest, therefore, has shifted from the domestic struggle to the psychology of Willie and Alice, who, together or separately, are all the main interest left.

The effect of this is that Willie and Alice, in

Acts I-III, under Boothroyd's dominion, seem to be mere sheep; reluctant sheep, but still sheep. But in Act IV. they have become, so to speak, well-fed pug-dogs. The transmutation has taken place entirely "off". In Acts I.-III. they are timid; in Act IV, smug. All the stages of transition are omitted, and they are presented as utterly different people. The play cannot therefore be realized as a continuous picture of developing life.

A hostile critic might suspect the fourth act of being a device for avoiding the tragic ending. It is more sympathetic to say that drama has the drawbacks of life. In life very few persons follow acutely all the minute emotions of their friends and foes, and actions are far more visible and significant than thoughts—of course, in daily traffic only, not in results or influence. A deed, like personality itself, is a direct and immediate stimulus to another person; but only a very nimble mind can follow certainly and immediately the processes of thought which are behind the spoken word. The act of reading allows time for understanding those processes, and the provision of fuller corroborative detail. The act of sight is too swift for most people; an audience of Henry Jameses or Arnold Bennetts or James Barries is impossible. Plays must, therefore, be written for slightly less vivacious people. This play fails in that respect.

I do not mean by this that "the intelligent, imaginative writer" is not to write for the stage, or that he will never find an intelligent, imaginative audience. It is simply a question of degree or (physiologically) of the speed of reaction to stimulus. Some few people react very readily to very slight stimuli; we call them "quick" or "sympathetic". Many hardly react at all unless the stimulus is blunt and heavy; hence the popularity of musical comedy and comedians with protuberant waists. To borrow an illustration from a kindred branch of stage art. Mephistopheles in red looks very tremendous against a black background. But you, the "producer", want to make him look even more coldly diabolical, and you think a little green light would have the desired result. You get the green to a certain density, very hopefully—and then Mephistopheles simply vanishes; literally, he becomes invisible to anyone a few yards away. The green and red rays have played with the optic nerve, and Mephistopheles cannot be seen. It is a trick of optics. So the failure to get a good deal of psychology from speaker to hearer is a trick of mental optics; aesthetics, to give the thing the proper name. The right mixture of rays is not in the last act of *Cupid and Commonsense*.

I have dwelt on this point more fully than is really warranted by the discussion of a single play. It is necessary because chat play, as now published, contains a well reasoned polemical preface denouncing the unintelligence of most English theaters, and demanding intelligent dramas by intelligent dramatists. Arnold Bennett says that there are plenty of such plays to be had. The accusation and the statement are both entirely true. But there is a great deal more in the dramatic stimulus than an appeal to the intelligence. The preface to *Cupid and Commonsense* implies that there is not; the play itself proved that there is. It is, of all Arnold Bennett's performed plays, the one which contains the most profound single or main idea—that of the conflict between sense and commonsense, feeling and reason. All his plays are, as a matter of fact, plays with main ideas, even that delightful fantasia, *The Great Adventure*. *Cupid and Commonsense* goes deeper than any. Its failure comes from the fact that its depth is uneven, shifting, and not to be charted—at one moment "dramatic", at another mental.

However, the play certainly vindicated its author's claim to intelligence and imagination. It was followed, in 1909, by a comedy in which intelligence lit up a certain large and disturbing phenomenon of modern English life. *What the Public Wants* is the dramatic expression of the spirit underlying *The Truth About an Author*; and it is just as faithful and terrible a piece of realism. But the public does not know it. The expert is seldom tremendous enough to be a prophet as well, and the audience he deserves treats him either as a Blue book, too heavy to digest, or as a reed shaken by the wind. *What the Public Wants* will only be a popular play when it describes what the public no longer wants; when it has ripened, in fact, into a comedy of manners. To-day it is a play for the small theater and the select audience; in such a setting it can be fully appreciated.

It deals, like Mr. Montague's *Hind Let Loose*, with the mixture of self-deception and conscious deception of the public which inspires a newspaper. It is a faithful portrait of a great newspaper proprietor, who states his creed quite frankly:

> "I've no desire at all to ram my personal ideas down the throats of forty different publics. I give each what it wants. I'm not a blooming reformer. I'm a merchant."

(The final sentence provokes the grimly true retort, "On Sundays you're a muck merchant.") Such are the views of Sir Charles Worgan, Arnold Bennett's Napoleon of the press. They are the views which, it cannot be denied, are behind certain manifestations of the English newspaper. And there are only two answers to them. One is the policeman, but no judge and no jury would convict such a prisoner as Worgan. The other answer is indicated by Arnold Bennett. There will come at long last a rainy day for the immoral, capricious, catch-half penny press, when "the public will want something better than you can give it." Education, that efficiency of soul as of conduct which Arnold Bennett is for ever ingeminating, will be the death of the "office-boy press".

There is no other version of *What the Public Wants*; it affords no contrast between literature and speech as means of expression. In *The Great Adventure* we return to that contrast. The play is a dramatic version of that excellent "tale of these days", *Buried Alive*. I do not know which was written first, nor does it matter, though it would be an interesting revelation; the book was first published in 1908, the play first acted in 1911. The play had a prodigious run. As everybody knows, it deals with a great painter ("the only question which cultured persons felt it their duty to believe was whether he was the greatest painter who ever lived or merely the greatest painter since Velasquez") who, out of shyness, let his valet be buried in Westminster Abbey in mistake for himself, and was eventually discovered to be alive.

The idea of a great man has always had a lure for Arnold Bennett. In this book and this play he realizes it more fully than elsewhere; in the play especially. He solves an author's most difficult problem—the problem of persuading his audience of his meaning without explaining it in so many words. He had to give, and he gave, through Mr. Ainley, by Mr. Ainley's help in giving suitable expression to the words provided, an impression of intellectual eminence—a feeling that the painter was capable of the great achievements attributed to him, and was not a mere piece in a mosaic.

A few weeks after the appearance of *The Great Adventure* in Glasgow, *The Honeymoon* was presented at the Royalty Theater, London. It had the advantage of an almost perfect cast. But that advantage was, in a sense, a defect, because *The Honeymoon* is exactly what the law labels it—a stage play, and Miss Marie Tempest and Mr. Graham Browne did not have to work to turn it into real life. It is amusing. A writer of so strong an ironic humor as Arnold Bennett must necessarily make some fun out of his central situation—the refusal of a bride to shorten her honeymoon in order to let her aviator husband fly over Snowdon before a German rival can do so, and the very opportune discovery that their marriage (just celebrated) was void because the officiating curate was a sham. The discussion, however (it is not unduly complicated by action), lasts through three acts. The dialogue is often banal, and the secondary characters are all layfigures, grouped, not living and moving individuals. The play as a whole is too close to that school of drama which has made the adjective "dramatic" synonymous with "unreal" or "improbable". It is the work of a man obviously capable of modernity, but reverting to the type-comedy of Byron and Kobertson. One would like to learn that it was one of those plays written early, but held up, as Arnold Bennett complains, by managers.

There remains, of all the published or produced plays of the author, only *Milestones*, produced on 5th March 1912. It is, however, not entirely by Arnold Bennett, and should properly not be considered in this book, unless one were exactly aware of the extent of his collaboration. It would be dangerous to dogmatize about it. I am told that when Mr. Comyns Carr and Mr. Stephen Phillips collaborated in a grievous version of *Faust*, all the highly skilled literary critics fell a-choosing the parts each author ought to have written, or to be ashamed of having written; with the result that the poetic achievement of Mr. Carr was very gratifyingly ascribed to Mr. Phillips. So I do not propose to try to dissever Mr. Knoblauch, part-author of Milestones, from Mr. Bennett. I only wish here to quote the closing words, words used a hundred times during life by every Englishman. The granddaughter, radiant, triumphant in youth and beauty and the knowledge of to-day, has gone out tenderly, leaving Sir John Rhead and his wife alone—old lovers, with all the asperities of a life's intercourse dimmed and forgotten. That pretty Victorian tinkle of *Juanita* sounds from the next room, sung by the old maid who has solved, in her barren disappointment, all the mystery of human sorrow:

JOHN

(looking at the flower). We live and learn.

ROSE

(nodding her head). Yes, John.

I neither know nor care which author contrived that gentle "curtain". But it might have been written at the end of each of Arnold Bennett's three great books—*Clayhanger*, *Anna of the Five Towns*, and, greatest of all, *The Old Wives' Tale*.

I wish it could be said, in summing up Arnold Bennett's work as a playwright, that that vision of life (however little one sees or knows in the vision) is his characteristic dramatic accomplishment. But he has really, as yet, made no mark upon the drama. He is too uneven a worker. He is always competent or skilled, but he does not climb the steep ascent of imaginative triumph. He brings intelligence to bear, but not imagination or strong effort. He does not even, in his plays, force an intellectual discussion of the potential problems with which he deals. He does not bring to the theater what other men could not bring equally well. If he could put upon the stage, with kindred reticence and sincerity, such a scene as the farewell between Anna of the Five Towns and Willie Price, or as Sophia Scales's last sight of her husband in the upper room at Manchester, or such a piece of atmosphere as is breathed in Clayhanger's first visit to the Orgreaves, then he would mean much to the drama. He would give it "timber, or a piece of the world discovered."

CHAPTER 7

"To-Day and To-morrow"

IT may seem, perhaps, that too many of the foregoing pages have been devoted to pointing out blemishes in the Five Towns and weaknesses in the novelist produced by them. I have been dealing with two things, with Arnold Bennett and with a state of society. Neither is quite like anything else in English literature, and if I have emphasized failure rather than success it is because the partial failure of a new product is more instructive than its complete and easy success. Let me explain now why and how Arnold Bennett and his work are new.

I have said that the society he describes, and I have implied that his point of view in describing it, is middle class: purely and really of the very middle, in mind, body and estate. I have pointed out local conditions which in-bred that society and isolated it from the general current of world-culture, except in regard to music and a few refinements of material comfort. And I have suggested that it belongs to a marked epoch of industrial evolution. Now neither that epoch nor that society has ever appeared in English fiction before; nor has any novelist of middle or higher industrial life ever presented his material with such a literary equipment and outlook as Arnold Bennett possesses. That is the great and new importance of his work.

It is a suggestive fact that a great commercial nation like England should lack novels of commerce. There are plenty of romances of business, plenty of fictitious indictments of business methods, plenty of stories of the squalor and contrasts of a commercially organized society. There are a few great novels of industrial life: Mrs. Gaskell's, for instance. But no one hitherto, so far as I know, has not merely portrayed the life of the middle class manufacturer but spoken with his voice. When H. G. Wells is dealing with trade, he is criticizing it from the standpoint of intelligent socialism—deploring its want of education, admiring its bravery and pathos, hating its mechanical, anti-social mercilessness. When William de Morgan describes the lower middle class, he does so with a reserve of his own idealism. When Upton Sinclair, or James Bryce, or Oliver Onions, or May Sinclair, or any similar novelist of eminence touches the middle and lower strata in one way or another, there is always a different, alien ideal in their work. In the Five Towns novels there is no ideal. There is no criticism. There is no tradition or philosophy of society. There is nothing but life as the people described live it and see it and feel it.

It may or may not be for the good of England in general that such a life is lived by such people. But it is very much for the good of English literature that a writer can so profoundly master his art as to present this passionless panorama of life. I have spoken of Arnold Bennett's efficiency: it is a Five Towns virtue, appreciated and desired by Five Townsmen. But it must not be confused with this infinitely higher artistic efficiency—this selflessness, this steady, inexorable, faithful comprehension of mind and power of expression. That also is new in England, though it is not peculiar to Arnold Bennett. It is the new spirit of English fiction, working to maintain and to advance the glory of a form of art which in this country has had a history full of honor. The English novel will not suffer through such a spirit. It will rather grow to the measure of that vaster civilization which we are only just beginning.

It is not in all his books, not even in a majority of them, that Arnold Bennett reaches this height. Perhaps only one writer living to-day has shown the power of being always at the same pitch of soul (I say nothing now of expression or subject): Thomas Hardy, with whom Arnold Bennett has much more in common than the utter external dissimilarity of their books suggests. If all his novels were on the same plane as *The Old Wives' Tale*, Arnold Bennett would have recreated English fiction (he has already, like H. G. Wells, had a great influence upon younger writers). What he will ultimately achieve I cannot hope to prophesy. It can at least be said of him with confidence that at the age of forty-seven he is capable of surpassing, in almost any direction, all except his very best work yet done. He is not like Galba and many modern novelists—*capax imperii, nisi imperasset*; he has realized his own promise, and he still keeps the promise alive. At the same time, he has the little weaknesses of his individual virtues. He is so efficient that he economizes details, as I have pointed out. He is so skilled that he may not always realize the unevenness of labor easily accomplished. He has that occasional cocksureness of a Card, that inability to perceive local or provincial limitations. He has an unfortunate mediocrity of style in keeping with his own definition of that almost indefinable thing:

> "Style cannot be distinguished from matter. When a writer conceives an idea he conceives it in a form of words. That form of words constitutes his style, and it is absolutely governed by the idea. The idea can only exist in words, and it can only exist in one form of

> words. You cannot say exactly the same thing in two different ways." (*Literary Taste*, Chapter VI)

There are debatable points in that formula, but it suffices. Arnold Bennett's style varies directly as his matter, except that he really does write bad English now and then, when the matter is not necessarily bad. In his matter there is no bright color: he uses few images—he thinks in things, not in pictures. By education and training he relies upon a vocabulary that is unrelievedly plain: a primrose is a primrose to him—I am not sure that it is even yellow; and he employs words for what they denote, not for what they connote. The result is to make his victories more difficult, and (a curious irony) to necessitate the use of a great many severe grey words where another writer might have done as well with one purple one. There is no beauty in his English, no majesty: yet there is beauty and majesty in some of the thoughts he suggests—thoughts which will exist, for every reader, in other words than those he uses.

That greyness, and the ugliness which it implies, I have ascribed to his environment. Almost one would think that men are born old in Bursley, so little sense of wonder and ecstasy do they show. There is but one hint of rapture (other than the cheerfulness of streets and crowds) in all the Five Towns novels—that recurrent mention of the garden of the Orgreaves in *Clayhanger*. Only once, as yet, has Arnold Bennett dealt with the first happiness of marriage—and then *The Price of Love* is disillusion. All his other characters are either but pupils being taught the grammar of life, or middle-aged and old people long weary of every syllable of it. Even Edwin Clayhanger has grown grave and preoccupied without marrying Hilda; while Denry Machin has too strenuous a hold on the means of living to enjoy life.

And yet there is the converse of that gravity to be weighed. When one has considered all the pettiness and coarseness and gloom of the Five Towns, there still remains something deeper, some quality not described, not mentioned, which makes Arnold Bennett's characters human. I should say that it is the spirit of freedom in them, the spirit for which their creator has so often argued of late. Much foolishness is talked in the name of liberty, much pomp has been given to a semblance of it with no atom of substance in it. But it is, in spite of all hypocrisies and servilities and cynicisms, the secret heritage which, all unconscious, Englishmen hand on one to another. These Five Townspeople live in it and by it. They value their independence. They have one and all a robust and confident bravery. Yet they would laugh at the idea of upholding or proclaiming the Rights of Man. They do not know that they themselves are the embodiment of them. All their pride, their bustling life, their concentrated, narrow force, their ambitions and their courage, are sprung from old freedom, and are the living seeds of a growth into that wider, nobler liberty towards which the army of mankind's night is for ever toiling.