

# The Old Wives' Tale

by

Arnold Bennett

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Preface To This Edition .....	3
I.1. The Square .....	6
I.2 The Tooth .....	20
I.3. A Battle.....	28
I.4. Elephant.....	51
I.5. The Traveller .....	64
I.6. Escapade .....	77
I.7. A Defeat.....	90
II.1. Revolution .....	100
II.2. Christmas And The Future.....	113
II.3. Cyril.....	124
II.4. Crime .....	138
II.5. Another Crime.....	151
II.6. The Widow .....	174
II.7. Bricks And Mortar .....	183
II.8. The Proudest Mother.....	192
III.1. The Elopement .....	200
III.2. Supper .....	209
III.3. An Ambition Satisfied .....	220
III.4. A Crisis For Gerald.....	233
III.5. Fever .....	247
III.6. The Siege .....	271
III.7. Success .....	290
IV.1. Frensham's .....	303
IV.2. The Meeting.....	325
IV.3. Towards Hotel Life.....	343
IV.4. End Of Sophia .....	371
IV.5. End Of Constance.....	394

## Preface To This Edition

In the autumn of 1903 I used to dine frequently in a restaurant in the Rue de Clichy, Paris. Here were, among others, two waitresses that attracted my attention. One was a beautiful, pale young girl, to whom I never spoke, for she was employed far away from the table which I affected. The other, a stout, middle-aged managing Breton woman, had sole command over my table and me, and gradually she began to assume such a maternal tone towards me that I saw I should be compelled to leave that restaurant. If I was absent for a couple of nights running she would reproach me sharply: "What! you are unfaithful to me?" Once, when I complained about some French beans, she informed me roundly that French beans were a subject which I did not understand. I then decided to be eternally unfaithful to her, and I abandoned the restaurant. A few nights before the final parting an old woman came into the restaurant to dine. She was fat, shapeless, ugly, and grotesque. She had a ridiculous voice, and ridiculous gestures. It was easy to see that she lived alone, and that in the long lapse of years she had developed the kind of peculiarity which induces guffaws among the thoughtless. She was burdened with a lot of small parcels, which she kept dropping. She chose one seat; and then, not liking it, chose another; and then another. In a few moments she had the whole restaurant laughing at her. That my middle-aged Breton should laugh was indifferent to me, but I was pained to see a coarse grimace of giggling on the pale face of the beautiful young waitress to whom I had never spoken.

I reflected, concerning the grotesque diner: "This woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. Very probably she is unconscious of her singularities. Her case is a tragedy. One ought to be able to make a heartrending novel out of the history of a woman such as she." Every stout, ageing woman is not grotesque--far from it!--but there is an extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her form and movements and in her mind. And the fact that the change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos.

It was at this instant that I was visited by the idea of writing the book which ultimately became "The Old Wives' Tale." Of course I felt that the woman who caused the ignoble mirth in the restaurant would not serve me as a type of heroine. For she was much too old and obviously unsympathetic. It is an absolute rule that the principal character of a novel must not be unsympathetic, and the whole modern tendency of realistic fiction is against oddness in a prominent figure. I knew that I must choose the sort of woman who would pass unnoticed in a crowd.

I put the idea aside for a long time, but it was never very distant from me. For several reasons it made a special appeal to me. I had always been a convinced admirer of Mrs. W. K. Clifford's most precious novel, "Aunt Anne," but I wanted to see in the story of an old woman many things that Mrs. W. K. Clifford had omitted from "Aunt Anne." Moreover, I had always revolted against the absurd

youthfulness, the unfading youthfulness of the average heroine. And as a protest against this fashion, I was already, in 1903, planning a novel ("Leonora") of which the heroine was aged forty, and had daughters old enough to be in love. The reviewers, by the way, were staggered by my hardihood in offering a woman of forty as a subject of serious interest to the public. But I meant to go much farther than forty! Finally as a supreme reason, I had the example and the challenge of Guy de Maupassant's "Une Vie." In the nineties we used to regard "Une Vie" with mute awe, as being the summit of achievement in fiction. And I remember being very cross with Mr. Bernard Shaw because, having read "Une Vie" at the suggestion (I think) of Mr. William Archer, he failed to see in it anything very remarkable. Here I must confess that, in 1908, I read "Une Vie" again, and in spite of a natural anxiety to differ from Mr. Bernard Shaw, I was gravely disappointed with it. It is a fine novel, but decidedly inferior to "Pierre et Jean" or even "Fort Comme la Mort." To return to the year 1903. "Une Vie" relates the entire life history of a woman. I settled in the privacy of my own head that my book about the development of a young girl into a stout old lady must be the English "Une Vie." I have been accused of every fault except a lack of self-confidence, and in a few weeks I settled a further point, namely, that my book must "go one better" than "Une Vie," and that to this end it must be the life-history of two women instead of only one. Hence, "The Old Wives' Tale" has two heroines. Constance was the original; Sophia was created out of bravado, just to indicate that I declined to consider Guy de Maupassant as the last forerunner of the deluge. I was intimidated by the audacity of my project, but I had sworn to carry it out. For several years I looked it squarely in the face at intervals, and then walked away to write novels of smaller scope, of which I produced five or six. But I could not dally forever, and in the autumn of 1907 I actually began to write it, in a village near Fontainebleau, where I rented half a house from a retired railway servant. I calculated that it would be 200,000 words long (which it exactly proved to be), and I had a vague notion that no novel of such dimensions (except Richardson's) had ever been written before. So I counted the words in several famous Victorian novels, and discovered to my relief that the famous Victorian novels average 400,000 words apiece. I wrote the first part of the novel in six weeks. It was fairly easy to me, because, in the seventies, in the first decade of my life, I had lived in the actual draper's shop of the Baines's, and knew it as only a child could know it. Then I went to London on a visit. I tried to continue the book in a London hotel, but London was too distracting, and I put the thing away, and during January and February of 1908, I wrote "Buried Alive," which was published immediately, and was received with majestic indifference by the English public, an indifference which has persisted to this day.

I then returned to the Fontainebleau region and gave "The Old Wives' Tale" no rest till I finished it at the end of July, 1908. It was published in the autumn of the same year, and for six weeks afterward the English public steadily confirmed an opinion expressed by a certain person in whose judgment I had confidence, to the effect that the work was honest but dull, and that when it was not dull it had a regrettable tendency to facetiousness. My publishers, though brave fellows, were

somewhat disheartened; however, the reception of the book gradually became less and less frigid.

With regard to the French portion of the story, it was not until I had written the first part that I saw from a study of my chronological basis that the Siege of Paris might be brought into the tale. The idea was seductive; but I hated, and still hate, the awful business of research; and I only knew the Paris of the Twentieth Century. Now I was aware that my railway servant and his wife had been living in Paris at the time of the war. I said to the old man, "By the way, you went through the Siege of Paris, didn't you?" He turned to his old wife and said, uncertainly, "The Siege of Paris? Yes, we did, didn't we?" The Siege of Paris had been only one incident among many in their lives. Of course, they remembered it well, though not vividly, and I gained much information from them. But the most useful thing which I gained from them was the perception, startling at first, that ordinary people went on living very ordinary lives in Paris during the siege, and that to the vast mass of the population the siege was not the dramatic, spectacular, thrilling, ecstatic affair that is described in history. Encouraged by this perception, I decided to include the siege in my scheme. I read Sarcey's diary of the siege aloud to my wife, and I looked at the pictures in Jules Claretie's popular work on the siege and the commune, and I glanced at the printed collection of official documents, and there my research ended.

It has been asserted that unless I had actually been present at a public execution, I could not have written the chapter in which Sophia was at the Auxerre solemnity. I have not been present at a public execution, as the whole of my information about public executions was derived from a series of articles on them which I read in the Paris *Matin*. Mr. Frank Harris, discussing my book in "Vanity Fair," said it was clear that I had not seen an execution, (or words to that effect), and he proceeded to give his own description of an execution. It was a brief but terribly convincing bit of writing, quite characteristic and quite worthy of the author of "Montes the Matador" and of a man who has been almost everywhere and seen almost everything. I comprehended how far short I had fallen of the truth! I wrote to Mr. Frank Harris, regretting that his description had not been printed before I wrote mine, as I should assuredly have utilized it, and, of course, I admitted that I had never witnessed an execution. He simply replied: "Neither have I." This detail is worth preserving, for it is a reproof to that large body of readers, who, when a novelist has really carried conviction to them, assert off hand: "O, that must be autobiography!"

ARNOLD BENNETT.

## I.1. The Square

Those two girls, Constance and Sophia Baines, paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious. They were, for example, established almost precisely on the fifty-third parallel of latitude. A little way to the north of them, in the creases of a hill famous for its religious orgies, rose the river Trent, the calm and characteristic stream of middle England. Somewhat further northwards, in the near neighbourhood of the highest public-house in the realm, rose two lesser rivers, the Dane and the Dove, which, quarrelling in early infancy, turned their backs on each other, and, the one by favour of the Weaver and the other by favour of the Trent, watered between them the whole width of England, and poured themselves respectively into the Irish Sea and the German Ocean. What a county of modest, unnoticed rivers! What a natural, simple county, content to fix its boundaries by these tortuous island brooks, with their comfortable names--Trent, Mease, Dove, Tern, Dane, Mees, Stour, Tame, and even hasty Severn! Not that the Severn is suitable to the county! In the county excess is deprecated. The county is happy in not exciting remark. It is content that Shropshire should possess that swollen bump, the Wrekin, and that the exaggerated wildness of the Peak should lie over its border. It does not desire to be a pancake like Cheshire. It has everything that England has, including thirty miles of Watling Street; and England can show nothing more beautiful and nothing uglier than the works of nature and the works of man to be seen within the limits of the county. It is England in little, lost in the midst of England, unsung by searchers after the extreme; perhaps occasionally somewhat sore at this neglect, but how proud in the instinctive cognizance of its representative features and traits!

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

cuckoo was much more perceptible than man, dominating whole square miles with his resounding call. And on the airy moors heath-larks played in the ineffaceable mule-tracks that had served centuries before even the Romans thought of Watling Street. In short, the usual daily life of the county was proceeding with all its immense variety and importance; but though Constance and Sophia were in it they were not of it.

The fact is, that while in the county they were also in the district; and no person who lives in the district, even if he should be old and have nothing to do but reflect upon things in general, ever thinks about the county. So far as the county goes, the district might almost as well be in the middle of the Sahara. It ignores the county, save that it uses it nonchalantly sometimes as leg-stretcher on holiday afternoons, as a man may use his back garden. It has nothing in common with the county; it is richly sufficient to itself. Nevertheless, its self-sufficiency and the true salt savour of its life can only be appreciated by picturing it hemmed in by county. It lies on the face of the county like an insignificant stain, like a dark Pleiades in a green and empty sky. And Hanbridge has the shape of a horse and its rider, Bursley of half a donkey, Knype of a pair of trousers, Longshaw of an octopus, and little Turnhill of a beetle. The Five Towns seem to cling together for safety. Yet the idea of clinging together for safety would make them laugh. They are unique and indispensable. From the north of the county right down to the south they alone stand for civilization, applied science, organized manufacture, and the century--until you come to Wolverhampton. They are unique and indispensable because you cannot drink tea out of a teacup without the aid of the Five Towns; because you cannot eat a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns. For this the architecture of the Five Towns is an architecture of ovens and chimneys; for this its atmosphere is as black as its mud; for this it burns and smokes all night, so that Longshaw has been compared to hell; for this it is unlearned in the ways of agriculture, never having seen corn except as packing straw and in quartern loaves; for this, on the other hand, it comprehends the mysterious habits of fire and pure, sterile earth; for this it lives crammed together in slippery streets where the housewife must change white window-curtains at least once a fortnight if she wishes to remain respectable; for this it gets up in the mass at six a.m., winter and summer, and goes to bed when the public-houses close; for this it exists--that you may drink tea out of a teacup and toy with a chop on a plate. All the everyday crockery used in the kingdom is made in the Five Towns--all, and much besides. A district capable of such gigantic manufacture, of such a perfect monopoly--and which finds energy also to produce coal and iron and great men-- may be an insignificant stain on a county, considered geographically, but it is surely well justified in treating the county as its back garden once a week, and in blindly ignoring it the rest of the time.

Even the majestic thought that whenever and wherever in all England a woman washes up, she washes up the product of the district; that whenever and wherever in all England a plate is broken the fracture means new business for the district--even this majestic thought had probably never occurred to either of the girls. The fact is, that while in the Five Towns they were also in the Square, Bursley and the Square ignored the staple manufacture as perfectly as the

district ignored the county. Bursley has the honours of antiquity in the Five Towns. No industrial development can ever rob it of its superiority in age, which makes it absolutely sure in its conceit. And the time will never come when the other towns--let them swell and bluster as they may--will not pronounce the name of Bursley as one pronounces the name of one's mother. Add to this that the Square was the centre of Bursley's retail trade (which scorned the staple as something wholesale, vulgar, and assuredly filthy), and you will comprehend the importance and the self-isolation of the Square in the scheme of the created universe. There you have it, embedded in the district, and the district embedded in the county, and the county lost and dreaming in the heart of England!

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

The Baines's shop, to make which three dwellings had at intervals been thrown into one, lay at the bottom of the Square. It formed about one-third of the south side of the Square, the remainder being made up of Critchlow's (chemist), the clothier's, and the Hanover Spirit Vaults. ("Vaults" was a favourite synonym of the public-house in the Square. Only two of the public-houses were crude public-houses: the rest were "vaults.") It was a composite building of three storeys, in blackish-crimson brick, with a projecting shop-front and, above and behind that, two rows of little windows. On the sash of each window was a red cloth roll stuffed with sawdust, to prevent draughts; plain white blinds descended about six inches from the top of each window. There were no curtains to any of the windows save one; this was the window of the drawing-room, on the first floor at the corner of the Square and King Street. Another window, on the second storey, was peculiar, in that it had neither blind nor pad, and was very dirty; this was the window of an unused room that had a separate staircase to itself, the staircase being barred by a door always locked. Constance and Sophia had lived in continual expectation of the abnormal issuing from that mysterious room, which was next to their own. But they were disappointed. The room had no shameful secret except the incompetence of the architect who had made one house out of three; it was just an empty, unemployable room. The building had also a considerable frontage on King Street, where, behind the shop, was sheltered the parlour, with a large window and a door that led directly by two steps into the street. A strange peculiarity of the shop was that it bore no signboard. Once it had had a large signboard which a memorable gale had blown into the Square.



Mr. Baines had decided not to replace it. He had always objected to what he called "puffing," and for this reason would never hear of such a thing as a clearance sale. The hatred of "puffing" grew on him until he came to regard even a sign as "puffing." Uninformed persons who wished to find Baines's must ask and learn. For Mr. Baines, to have replaced the sign would have been to condone, yea, to participate in, the modern craze for unscrupulous self-advertisement. This abstention of Mr. Baines's from indulgence in signboards was somehow accepted by the more thoughtful members of the community as evidence that the height of Mr. Baines's principles was greater even than they had imagined.

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

II

They pressed their noses against the window of the show-room, and gazed down into the Square as perpendicularly as the projecting front of the shop would allow. The show-room was over the millinery and silken half of the shop. Over the woollen and shirting half were the drawing-room and the chief bedroom. When in quest of articles of coquetry, you mounted from the shop by a curving stair, and your head gradually rose level with a large apartment having a mahogany counter in front of the window and along one side, yellow linoleum on the floor, many cardboard boxes, a magnificent hinged cheval glass, and two chairs. The window-sill being lower than the counter, there was a gulf between the panes and the back of the counter, into which important articles such as scissors, pencils, chalk, and artificial flowers were continually disappearing: another proof of the architect's incompetence.

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

"There she goes!" exclaimed Sophia.

Up the Square, from the corner of King Street, passed a woman in a new bonnet with pink strings, and a new blue dress that sloped at the shoulders and grew to a vast circumference at the hem. Through the silent sunlit solitude of the Square (for it was Thursday afternoon, and all the shops shut except the confectioner's and one chemist's) this bonnet and this dress floated northwards in search of romance, under the relentless eyes of Constance and Sophia. Within them, somewhere, was the soul of Maggie, domestic servant at Baines's. Maggie had been at the shop since before the creation of Constance and Sophia. She lived seventeen hours of each day in an underground kitchen and larder, and the other seven in an attic, never going out except to chapel on Sunday evenings, and once a month on Thursday afternoons. "Followers" were most strictly forbidden

to her; but on rare occasions an aunt from Longshaw was permitted as a tremendous favour to see her in the subterranean den. Everybody, including herself, considered that she had a good "place," and was well treated. It was undeniable, for instance, that she was allowed to fall in love exactly as she chose, provided she did not "carry on" in the kitchen or the yard. And as a fact, Maggie had fallen in love. In seventeen years she had been engaged eleven times. No one could conceive how that ugly and powerful organism could softly languish to the undoing of even a butty-collier, nor why, having caught a man in her sweet toils, she could ever be imbecile enough to set him free. There are, however, mysteries in the souls of Maggies. The drudge had probably been affianced oftener than any woman in Bursley. Her employers were so accustomed to an interesting announcement that for years they had taken to saying naught in reply but 'Really, Maggie!' Engagements and tragic partings were Maggie's pastime. Fixed otherwise, she might have studied the piano instead.

"No gloves, of course!" Sophia criticized.

"Well, you can't expect her to have gloves," said Constance.

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

"Supposing she turns round and sees us?" Constance suggested.

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

There were, as usual, several loafers at the top of the Square, in the corner between the bank and the "Marquis of Granby." And one of these loafers stepped forward and shook hands with an obviously willing Maggie. Clearly it was a rendezvous, open, unashamed. The twelfth victim had been selected by the virgin of forty, whose kiss would not have melted lard! The couple disappeared together down Oldcastle Street.

"WELL!" cried Constance. "Did you ever see such a thing?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Not until supper."

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