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# ARNOLD BENNETT

*by*

WALTER ALLEN

*London*

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## BIOGRAPHICAL DATES

- May 27, 1867      Born at Shelton, Hanley, Staffordshire.
- 1888      .      Solicitor's clerk in London.
- 1893      .      •      •      Assistant editor of *Woman*.
- July, 1895      •      *A Letter Home* published in *The Yellow Book*.
- November, 1896  
May, 1900      J      Editor of *Woman*.
- 1898      .      *A Man from the North* published.
- 1902      *Anna of the Five Towns* published.
- 1903-1912      Lived mainly in France.
- July 4, 1907      Married Mile. Marguerite Soulie\
- 1908      *The Old Wives<sup>9</sup> Tale* published.
- 1910      *Clay hanger* published.
- 1911      *Tlie Card* published.
- 1911      Visited the United States.
- 1911      *Hilda Lessways* published.
- 1916      *Twse Twain* published.
- May, 1918      Appointed Director of British Propaganda in France.
- October 30, 1918      Temporarily in charge of Ministry of Information.
- 1921      Separated from his wife.
- 1922      Met Miss Dorothy Cheston.
- 1923      *Rickeyman Steps* published.
- 1926      *Lord Raingo* published.
- 1930      *Imperial Palace* published.,
- March 27,1931      Died in London\*



## CHAPTER I

### LIFE AND BACKGROUND

**D**URING the *ten* years that ended with his death on March 27, 1931, Arnold Bennett occupied a position in English life unique among English men of letters. He was a public figure in a way that no other English writer has been before or since. It was not that he was ever regarded as the greatest living English writer ; while Conrad and Hardy were alive that would have been impossible, and after their deaths there were still Shaw and Wells to overshadow, if not to out-top him. It was not so much that he was regarded as a great man. Rather his role was akin to that of a brains-trust philosopher ; and he could always be quoted and cartooned. He was, in other words, a character ; he was news ; he lived always in the fierce limelight of the public gaze ; and he was never abashed. He was the grand panjandrum of the *Evening Standard*, making best-sellers and rebuking Mrs. Virginia Woolf at a hundred pounds per thousand words. He was the popular oracle of the Press, giving his millions of readers the low down on religion and Relativity (" I may say that I disagree with Einstein's theory of curved space. There cannot, to my simple mind, be curved space. I also disagree with him when he says that there is no such thing as universal cosmic rime") He was the familiar figure at first nights, championship fights, society dinner dances ; the connoisseur of the glittering and the expensive, of great hotels and shining yachts. He was the friend of eminent men as diverse as

no mean thing to be a solicitor. Had he stayed in Hanley and conformed to the pattern his father had set for him, Bennett himself would have been a solicitor, in other words, an important person, a member of the town's ruling class. It is, after all, not so remarkable that Bennett could hobnob with ease with millionaires and cabinet ministers : he came of a class that hobnobs with provincial mayors as a matter of course and is itself fecund with provincial mayors; and who are grander than they ?

Bennett, in point of fact, was of the second generation of the successful; his father, a self-made man, was apparently the model for the early life of Darius Clayhanger. His forbears seem to have been mainly working class. Bennett himself writes, in his *Journal*:

This evocation by my mother of these farming, Puritanical ancestors, dust' now, was rather touching, in a way. It gave me larger ideas of the institution of " the family." When I thought also of my mother's mother's side (the Claytons), my father's father's side (the Bennetts, descended illegitimately, as my uncle John once told me, from " Schemer " Brindley the engineer) and my father's mother's side (the Vernons, of whom several I believe are now living in Burslem ignored by my father and us)—when I thought of all these four stocks gathered together and combined to produce me . . . a writer, an artist pure and simple, yet with strong mercantile instincts, living on a farm after two generations of town life, I wondered. It is strange that though all my grandparents worked with their hands—weavers, potters, farmers, etc.—I have a positive aversion for any manual labour ; the sole relic of all that manual dexterity, left in me, is a marked gift for juggling with balls.

The passage indicates the fluidity of the class system in which Bennett was born.

He was educated at the Newcasde-under-Lyme Middle School, which he left at the age of sixteen having passed the

London Matriculation examination. But probably more important than his secular schooling was his upbringing in the Wesleyan Methodist faith. His satirical attitude towards it is plain in all the Five Towns novels, but as Wesleyanism was a constant element in the life of the Five Towns so it was a constant element in his own. It was, one fancies, one of the factors in his upbringing that made it possible for him to immerse himself in the social world of London without corruption. For though he immersed himself in that world he was never wholly taken in by it. In many ways his values remained those of a provincial nonconformist; thus, in 1920, he writes to his nephew Richard, a Cambridge undergraduate : " There was one thing I noticed which rather disconcerted me. Namely, that *in* one day you had 2 beers in addition to my champagne. I do not like this. Most men ' up \* do not drink 2 beers a day ; many of them could not afford it. . . . If I objected to alcohol I should not offer you champagne. But I certainly think you shouldn't have more than one drink a day. *And never under any circumstances spirits.*'<sup>9</sup> The influence of the nonconformist attitude is seen even more potently in his attitude towards work. He wrote far too much : more than eighty books and plays published in thirty years. There was more than one reason for this enormity of output; but one of the most powerful was simply the nonconformist conscience, the ingrained belief that idleness was somehow wicked, a loophole for sin. The belief led him not only grossly to over-write, and to publish in book-form nearly everything he wrote ; it also led him to cram every waking hour that was not devoted to writing to the acquisition of useful knowledge : not far behind him lies the earnest purposiveness of the Sunday School and the Mechanics\* Institute.

From school he went into his father's law office. He was to be a solicitor, but he failed the Intermediate LL.B. examination of London University, and it is not difficult to believe that he was much more excited by his incursions into journalism—he contributed gossip paragraphs to the local evening paper, of which his father was a prominent shareholder—than by his daily exercise in the law. Then, at the age of twenty-one, he left Hanley for London: his father, it seems, was sufficiently like Darius Clayhanger to be unwilling to pay the son who was to inherit his business a living wage. But he would have left in any case. "There grows in the North Country a certain kind of youth of whom it may be said that he is born to be a Londoner." Thus the first sentence of *A Man from the North*. The young Bennett was that kind of youth.

The main sources of information about his early life in London are *The Truth About an Author* and *A Man from the North*. But *A Man from the North*, like *Clayhanger*, is a study not so much of the author himself as of what he might have become, had his will been less resolute, his creative impulse less strong; and *The Truth about an Author* is in part at any rate an exercise in *blague*. That book appeared as a serial in *The Academy* during 1898, when he had scarcely any serious reputation: he had published only *A Man from the North* and a little textbook *Journalism for Women*. He had come up to London unknown, "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." He continues: "I earned a scanty living as a 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." Like Richard Larch, in *A Man from the North*, and Edwin Clayhanger, he began to collect books, at first as a bibliophile rather than as a reader. That he might himself write anything more serious than newspaper journalism did not apparently strike him until he went to live among artists in Chelsea ; he had, they assured him, the artistic temperament, and he began to write in order to prove it.

The turning-point in his career was 1893. He won a prize of £20 from *Tit-Bits* for a humorous condensation of a Grant Allen serial ; and he wrote the short story *A Letter Home* which was to appear in 1895 in *The Yellow Book*. *Tit-Bits* and *The Yellow Book* : the unnatural juxtaposition was to be characteristic of his work as a writer from then onward. One may say that when Bennett found himself both in *Tit-Bits* and in *The Yellow Book* he had found himself; the pattern of his literary career was established.

In 1893, also, came the escape from the solicitor's office and the preparation of bills of cost. He was appointed assistant editor of the weekly paper *Woman*, in which, under the name of Gwendolen and similar pseudonyms, he wrote fashion-notes, cookery hints, book reviews and theatre notices. At the same time he had begun, " under the sweet influences of the de Goncourts, Turgenev, Flaubert, and de Maupassant," *A Man from the North*. " It was to be entirely unlike all English novels except those of one author," George Moore. It happens that Bennett, " the latest disciple of the de Goncourts," began to keep his famous journal in 1896, and from then on we have a much fuller and at distorted **account** of his early life as a writer than is obtainable from

*The Truth about an Author.* It is also a much more attractive picture of himself that he draws, for *The Truth about an Author* is a piece of journalism marred by the facetiousness which Bennett never escaped from except in his finest work, a facetiousness in this case probably arising from the fact that the author who was telling the truth about himself was not yet successful or known outside a small circle of friends and fellow journalists. It is, in other words, the first of Bennett's "Card" books, an exercise in bounce. Its rather unpleasantly knowing narrator is entirely absent from the pages of the journal. Instead, we see a young man whose earnestness and industry would have satisfied any Five Towns Methodist local preacher. He is very highbrow, he is obsessed with the art of fiction. Indeed, his seriousness, his passionate discipleship of the advanced novelists of the day, is such as to make him appear younger than his twenty-nine years. That was natural. From the beginning his intellectual life had been solitary; he had not lived in any society in which ideas were discussed for their own sake; he had known neither the stimulus of a university nor, until he came to London (and even then probably not for several years) the companionship of people of like interests. He was in everything that mattered a self-educated man; what he knew he had found out for himself, and he probably valued it the more highly because of that. Wells, who had shared in a much richer intellectual life than Bennett and had wider interests, refers to Bennett's "competent autonomy" as a man. This he seems to have possessed from the beginning, and it was doubtless reinforced by the solitary nature of his early intellectual and aesthetic life. It was certainly strengthened by the models he had taken for himself; for when he writes of himself "as the latest disciple of the

de Goncourts " he is *saying far more than that he is the latest naturalistic novelist.* At the age of twenty-nine his acquaintance with English literature was, to say the least, imperfect. He notes in the Journal for October 15, 1896, " I cannot recall a single author of whom I have read everything—even of Jane Austen. I have never *seen* 'Susan' and 'The Watsons,' one of which I have been told is superlatively good. Then there are large tracts of Shakespeare, Bacon, Spenser, nearly all Chaucer, Congreve, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Sterne, Johnson, Scott, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Edgeworth, Ferrier, Lamb, Leigh Hunt, Wordsworth (nearly all), Tennyson, Swinburne, the Brontes, George Eliot, W. Morris, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, Savage Landor, Thackeray, Carlyle—in fact, every classical author and most good modern authors, whom I have never even overlooked." Given a public school and university education, he could scarcely have escaped them. What took their place for him, and he had discovered them for himself, were the great nineteenth-century French novelists. We know that he had read Zola while in his teens, for he had offered an imitation of *L'Assommoir* to the editor of a local Potteries paper as a serial ! What set him on the track of the French we shall probably never know now; possibly their initial attraction was simply that they represented a life as different as well could be from that of philistine, Methodist Hanley.

They gave him—Flaubert, the Goncourts, Maupassant—not only an aesthetic but a model for living. Wells says : " To have a mistress in France was, he felt, part of the ensemble of the literary artist." The mistress in France did not materialise until some years later than 1896, but even by then he had established himself on the pattern of the French naturalists. It was from them, **in great part, that he**

derived the *persona* that he never lost and that never even seems to have cracked. The journal itself of course was suggested to him by the Goncourt journals. Everything seen and encountered during the day was to be put down as objectively as possible. "To-day," runs one entry, "as I walked among all the nursemaids and mothers and babies and loungers by the riverside in Bishop's Park—it was a beautiful sunny afternoon—I was specially struck by the immense quantity of fine material which the novelist must ignore or only peep at, in order to develop and utilise effectively his own particular chosen little titbit." All the immense quantity of fine material had to be known and recorded in the dossier of impressions, for there was no knowing what might be needed. And the keynote was to be detachment, impersonality—not always easily achieved. Thus, in 1897, Bennett goes back to Burslem for a family funeral. He does his best, but he records, sadly: "This affair is now over. The Goncourt Brothers would in my place have noted every item of it, and particularly watched themselves. I had intended to do as much. . . ."

But objectivity, detachment, was more than a literary ideal. The extent of autobiographical material on Bennett is large—the *Journals*, *The Truth about an Author*, many of the essays in such collections as *Things That Have Interested Me*, the letters to Dorothy Cheston Bennett, the letters to Richard Bennett. What is immediately striking about it all is the extreme paucity of subjective matter. Apart from an occasional, rarely expanded, reference to depression, there are practically no indications of Bennett's interior life. It is always the *persona* that is presented, and that full face; no hint of the shadow self behind the *persona*, which appears only in the many references to Bennett's nervous disorders,

his insomnia, his stammer, the indigestion and the bilious attacks. Wells, whose analysis of Bennett the man in *An Experiment in Autobiography* is the most valuable account that we have, dealing with his relations with women says: " I think there was some obscure hitch in his make-up here, some early scar that robbed him of the easy self-forgetfulness, that ' egoism expanded out of sight,' of a real lover. I associate that hitch with the stammer that ran through his *life*. Very far back in his early years something may have happened, something that has escaped any record, which robbed him of normal confidence and set up a lifelong awkwardness." That was true not only of his relations with women. Absence of an easy self-forgetfulness led to the dreadful facetiousness of his early journalism and the over-assertiveness of the later. It is as though he turned away from his private, interior life altogether ; and it is at this point that the lessons he learnt from the French naturalists are again important.

In his preface to *Pierre etjean*, one of the classic documents of naturalism, Maupassant contrasts the subjective with the objective novel. The subjective novel, he says, can lead only to the novelist's creating all his characters after his own likeness since the only psychology the novelist can know is his own. He therefore favours the objective novel, in which the novelist describes the externals alone of his characters, their behaviour and actions, resolutely refusing to describe their interior life. This is precisely how Bennett deals with himself in his journals, letters and other autobiographical writings : he sees himself as though **he** were a character in a naturalistic novel. He is not concerned with the expression of his emotions; he indulges in no introspection. He becomes, as it were, **the archetype of the**

naturalistic novelist. He was, *in a way*, his own creation. Wells writes of him in his later days: "Having been more than a little frustrated in his ambitions to run a well-managed wife in two brilliantly conducted establishments in London and the country, he fell back upon the deliberate development of his own personality. It was no self-dramatisation he attempted ; no covering up of defects by compensatory assumptions; it was a cool and systematic exploitation of his own oddities. He was as objective about himself and as amused about himself as about anything else in the world." It was a remarkable act of will ; and it throws light on those maddeningly superficial little manuals he wrote under such titles as *Mental Efficiency*, *How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, *The Human Machine*, and *Self and Self-Management*, in which he preached control of the brain. It wasn't, perhaps, as simple as the little books make it sound. There is, for instance, the journal entry of May 23, 1908, when he had already written three of them :

While reading it [Lewes's *History of Philosophy*] I was seized again with the idea of learning Latin decently ; it was so strong that I could scarcely keep my attention on the book. Another example of the undiscipline of the Brain.

Yet I have gradually got my brain far better under control than most people. Always haunted by dissatisfaction at the discrepancy between reason and conduct ! No reason why conduct should not conform to the ideas of reason, except inefficient control of the brain. This too I am always preaching, and with a success of popular interest too, I cannot perfectly practise. It is the clumsiness of my living that disgusts me. The rough carpentry instead of fine cabinetry. The unnecessary friction. The constant slight inattention to my own rules. I could be a marvel to others and to myself if only I practised more sincerely. Half an hour in the morning in complete concentration on the living-through of the day, and I should work

wonders ! But this all-important concentration is continually interrupted—interruptions which weaken it; sometimes deliberately abandoned for concentration on matters of admittedly inferior importance ! Strange ! One can only stick to it.

A marvel to himself he may never have been : he was certainly often a marvel to others. The continual relentless discipline he imposed upon himself may be deplored; in his novels, except at their best, it led him to substitute will-power for imagination ; but it was an heroic attempt to live a life conceived as art. And, if the whole attempt did not spring from the naturalistic ideal of objectivity, which he found at an early age in the only considerable body of literature that he knew, it powerfully reinforced the inclinations of his temperament. Nemesis, one feels, should have overtaken him. It may have done in his art; in life it never did ; he merely became richer and richer. For even though it is true that his best work was done at a comparatively early age, it cannot be said that the man who wrote *Anna of the Five Toivns*, *The Old Wives<sup>9</sup> Tale*, *Clayhanger* and *Riceyman Steps* was lacking in achievement.

Bennett remained on *Woman*, as assistant editor and then as editor, till 1900. By then John Lane had accepted and published *A Man from the North* on John Buchan's recommendation. It is interesting to note that his name appears on the title page as E. A. Bennett: the provincial Enoch, with its Methodist associations, has been suppressed, but the cosmopolitan Arnold, bold as brass, has yet to come to the fore. *Polite Farces*, a collection of one-act plays, and *Journalism for Women* had also appeared. Besides his work for *Woman* he was contributing reviews and dramatic criticism to the *Academy* and acting as reader for Pearsons. He was also writing serials for the syndicates. It was at about

this time that Wells first met him. The meeting is not mentioned in the journal, but according to *An Experiment in Autobiography* Bennett had written to Wells in 1897 to ask him how he came to know the Five Towns, described in *The Time Machine*. Of their meeting, Wells writes : " He was friendly and self-assured ; he knew quite clearly that we were both on our way to social distinction and incomes of several thousands a year. I had not thought of it like that. I was still only getting something between one and two thousands a year, and I did not feel at all secure about getting more. But Bennett knew we couldn't stop there. He had a through-ticket and a time-table—and he proved to be right." Wells, it has to be remembered, was writing more than thirty years after the event. He already had a considerable reputation and, as the figures show, was earning fair sums. *A Man from the North* had had no great critical success, and Bennett's profits from it " exceeded the cost of having it typewritten by the sum of one guinea." Compared with Wells's, Bennett's earnings were to remain moderate for many years. The journal entry for December 31, 1899, is relevant:

This year I have written 335,340 words, grand total. 228 articles and stories (including 4 instalments of a serial of 30,000—7500 words each) have actually been published.

Also my book of plays—*Polite Farces*.

I have written six or eight short stories not yet published or sold.

Also the greater part of 55,000 word serial *Love and Life*—for Tillotsons, which begins publication about April next year.

Also the whole draft (80,000 words) of my Staffordshire novel *Anna Tellwright*.

My total earnings were £592, 3s. id., of which I have yet to receive £72, 10s.

It was not an enormous return for the expenditure of so much energy. Nor, though his output remained large, did his earnings increase rapidly ; on December 23, 1903, we find the following entry in the Journal: " Yesterday I saw Pinker [Bennett's literary agent] twice, and after some hesitation on his part, arranged that he should pay me -£50 a month certain during 1904." He was then thirty-six. That same day he was told that Mrs. Humphrey Ward had been paid .£10,000 in America for the serial rights of *Lady Rose's Daughter*. Nothing like that was to happen to him until 1912, when, on December 31, he writes : " I received (less agents' commission) about £16,000 during the year, which may be called success by any worldly minded author. It is apparently about as much as I had earned during all the previous part of my life."

Nevertheless, by 1900 his future as a writer was sufficiently assured for him to be able to leave *Woman*. It was a step planned as early as the autumn of 1898 ; in the September of that year he writes in the Journal:

. . . Partly owing to the influence of [Eden] Philpotts, I have decided very seriously to take up fiction for a livelihood. A certain chronic poverty has forced upon me the fact that I was giving no attention to money-making, beyond my editorship, and so the resolution came about. Till the end of 1899 I propose to give myself absolutely to writing the sort of fiction that sells itself. My serious novel *Anna Tellwright* [*Anna of the Five Towns*] with which I have made some progress is put aside indefinitely—or rather until I have seen what I can do. To write popular fiction is offensive to me, but it *is* far more agreeable than being tied to an office and editing a lady's paper ; and perhaps it is less ignoble, and less of a strain on the conscience. To edit a lady's paper, even a relatively advanced one, is to foster conventionality and hinder progress regularly once a week. Moreover, I think that fiction will pay better,

and in order to be happy I must have a fair supply of money.

It was the pattern of *Tit-Bits* and *The Yellow Book* over again, now consciously adopted. It led to the production of a mass of inferior, to-day sometimes unreadable work, but it was Bennett's solution of the problem that has faced every serious English novelist without private means since the mid-Victorian period : how to write what he wants to without at the same time starving. For Bennett, it must be remembered, was one of the first conscious highbrows in the novel: he, almost as early as any Englishman, had heard the good news that Henry James and George Moore had brought back from Paris, that the novel was an art form. The great Victorian novelists, less sophisticated, had been more fortunate ; no fatal schism in public taste had yet occurred ; the whole of the literate public could read and enjoy Dickens and TroUope, for they catered for all levels of taste. But by the time Bennett began to write, the Education Act of 1870 had done its work, the schism in taste was a fact, and the existence side by side of *Tit-Bits* and *The Yellow Book* symbolised it as well as anything. It meant that no serious novelist, unless he was very lucky and was able to tap a huge popular interest, itself the product of the New Journalism, as Wells tapped the popular interest in scientific marvels, could hope to live, except after years of waiting, on his novels. Had he tried to do so, Bennett could no more have risen above the poverty-line than were Conrad and Lawrence able to for the greater part of their lives. For even when he arrived at the sum of .£16,000 in 1912, the bulk of that money came not from his fiction but from the success of his plays, *The Honeymoon*, *What the Public Wants*, *Cupid and Common Sense* and, particularly, *Milestones*

His plans laid, so much time to be allotted to commercial writing, serials, plays, short stories, newspaper articles, so much to art, Bennett left London and went to live at Trinity Hall Farm, at Hockliffe in Bedfordshire, where he was joined by his parents, his father now having retired from the law. His success, Wells writes, " was to be attained straightforwardly by writing sound clear stories, lucidly reasonable articles and well-constructed plays. His pride was in craftsmanship rather than in artistic expression, mystically intensified and passionately pursued, after the manner of Conrad. Possibly his ancestors had had just the same feeling about their work, when they spun the clay of pots and bowls finely and precisely. He was ready to turn his pen to anything, provided it could be well done."

He did not remain long at Hockliffe. From May 26, 1901, to September 28, 1903, there is a gap in the journal. But most of this time seems to have been spent in Paris, where he was to live almost continually until 1912. Despite his knowledge of nineteenth-century French fiction, his attitude to France seems never to have been other than that of the English provincial. He had many French friends in Paris, the earliest among them being Marcel Schwob, Henri Davray and M. D. Calvocoressi, afterwards well known as a music critic in London, and later he was to know Ravel, Valéry Larbaud and Gide. But his Paris was always the Paris of the Englishman on holiday, the city the Five Towns Methodists frowned upon, in which a lapsed Methodist could find freedom from Five Towns restraint. Towards Paris, in other words, he remained a *naif*. He achieved a French mistress, a chorus girl who figures in the journal as C. L., and from her he seems to have obtained an impression of Paris that might well have strengthened the Methodists'

distrust of it. As late as 1909 he writes: " My first vague impression was here at last defined, of Paris. Namely, the perversity and corruption of the faces. The numbers of women more or less chic also impressed me. A few, marvellous," It was the city of those equivocal expressions which cannot be translated into English and which Bennett was so fond of using, words like *chic* and *sans-gene*. It was the city of pleasure in which, his mistress assured him, " many *cocottes* pay their coachmen either partly or wholly in love." After Hanley, London had represented freedom, but London was nothing to this : " I had an idea, for my Hotel Continental novel, of doing the Covent Garden Fancy Dress Ball as a carnival scene, and making it seem as though nothing could surpass it, in the way of the abandon of decadence ; and then afterwards doing the Bal des Quat Arts here, knocking the Covent Garden affair all to smithereens." In Paris, too, he " witnessed for the first time the spectacle of a fairly large mixed company talking freely about scabrous facts. Then for the first time was I eased from the strain of pretending in a mixed company that things were not what they in fact are."

But dining, investigating Paris, theatre-, opera- and concert-going, furnishing a flat, pursuing the life of the man of letters on, so to speak, his home territory, did not prevent his working with the old unflinching purposive energy. There were the serious novel and the " fantasia," as he called his pot-boilers, being written concurrently, the play-writing which, he hoped, would bring him wealth, the articles on *savoirfaire* and *savoir vivre* for *T. P.'s Weekly*, which brought in £165 a year, the notes for the great novel which he planned for some years before actually writing it and which became *The Old Wives' Tale*, the enduring memorial of his

Paris days. And for several years there was no apparent increase either in his earnings or his literary reputation ; witness the journal entry for May 27, 1904 : " To-day I am 37. I have lived longer than I shall live. My new series begins to-day in the *Windsor*. My name is not on the cover. Anthony Hope's stands there alone. And I am 37. Comment is needless,"

The entry concludes : "I have now warned both the Mater and Tertia [his sister] that I shall get married before I am 40." He was right as he always was ; or at least he was not more than two months out. In June 1906, he became engaged to an American lady, Miss Eleanor Green, the elder sister of the distinguished novelist, Julian Green. Within two months the engagement had been broken off. Mrs. Dorothy Cheston Bennett considers this episode of cardinal, even traumatic, importance in his life, as a wound from which his emotional life never recovered. There seems little evidence for this view ; the episode had no perceptible effect upon his work, and he was not exactly an adolescent. Doubtless it was a blow to his *amour propre* ; possibly it served to intensify the rigidity of his *persona* ; it certainly did not shake his resolve to marry. Six months later he met Mile. Marguerite Soulie ; he married her on July 4, 1907. He thereupon took a house at Fontainbleau and settled down at last to write *The Old Wives' Tale*, though its progress was interrupted for a few months while he visited England, where he wrote the fantasia *Buried Alive* and arranged with A. R. Orage to contribute to *The New Age* a weekly causerie, later collected and published as *Books and Persons*, for a guinea a time.

With the publication of *The Old Wives' Tale* in 1908 he was famous ; the novel lifted him immediately into the

highest ranks of contemporary writers ; by its success the public Bennett of the war years and the twenties was launched, as many entries in the journal show. Massingham informs him that he considers the *Old Wives' Tale* to be one of the one or two really great novels of the last thirty years and invites him to write for *The Nation*. He is elected to the National Liberal Club. In 1911, under the auspices of his American publisher, he undertakes a triumphant tour of the United States. The following year sees the end of the French phase of his life ; he buys a country house, Comarques, at Thorpe-le-Soken, Essex, and his first yacht, the *Velsa*.

Since we have now reached the time when increasingly he was to hobnob with politicians and cabinet ministers and meet the Prime Minister at supper dances, a word on Bennett's political views is appropriate here. He was not, of course, in any sense a political thinker nor, except on rare occasions, an active politician. He considered himself all his life a socialist, but at no time was he a militant propagandist for socialism ; he was, in fact, a member of the Liberal Party, an advanced radical for whom the enemy was always the Tories. It is significant that during the General Strike of 1926 he supported the Government. In the face of poverty, the class war and social exploitation, his own position was much that of Edwin Clayhanger in *These Twain*, written at a time when Bennett himself " was getting richer every day " :

Something wrong ! Under the influence of strikes and anarchist meetings he felt with foreboding and even with a little personal alarm that something was wrong. Those greasy, slatternly girls, for instance, with their coarse charm and their sexuality—they were underpaid. They received as much as

other girls, on potbanks, perhaps more, but they were underpaid. What chance had they? He was getting richer every day, and safer (except for the vague menace); yet he could not appreciably improve their lot, partly for business reasons, partly because any attempt to do so would bring the community about his ears and he would be labelled as a doctrinaire and a fool, and partly because his own commonsense was against such a move. Not those girls, not his works, not this industry and that, was wrong. All was wrong. And it was impossible to imagine any future period when all would not be wrong. Perfection was a desolating thought. Nevertheless the struggle towards it was instinctive and had to go on. The danger (in Edwin's eyes) was of letting that particular struggle monopolise one's energy. Well, he would not let it. He did a little here and a little there, and he voted democratically and in his heart was most destructively sarcastic about Toryism; and for the rest he relished the adventure of existence, and did the best he conscientiously could, and thought pretty well of himself as a lover of his fellow-men.

His indignation at economic misery and sweating was generous, and is everywhere evident in his work, notably in the famous fourth chapter of *Clayhanger* and in the ironical accounts of servant girls in the Five Towns novels and *Riceyman Steps*. In the journals such passages as the following, describing a visit to Brighton in 1910, are common.

Our first stroll along the front impressed me very favourably, yesterday afternoon. But I am obsessed by the thought that all this comfort, luxury, ostentation, snobbishness and correctness, is founded on a vast injustice to the artisan class. I can never get away from this. The furs, autos, fine food, attendance, and diamond rings of this hotel only impress it on me more.

The attraction that the splendid and luxurious held for him never blinded him to the poverty that was its concomitant; he was never taken in by the Grand Babylon Hotel. The significant word in the passage just quoted is

"injustice." It echoes an entry in the journal made two years earlier :

Love of justice, more than outraged sensibility at the spectacle of suffering and cruelty, prompts me to support social reforms. *I can and do look at suffering with scientific (artistic) coldness.* I do not care. I am above *it* But I want to hasten justice, for its own sake.

And indeed there were occasions when he did seek to hasten justice by direct participation in politics. Thus *in* December, 1909, while visiting the Potteries to collect material for *Clayhanger*, he went up to Manchester where he was entertained by members of the staff of the *Guardian*. Back in Burslem, "Edmund Leigh called, and he orated for an hour with such persuasive effect that in the end I volunteered to write a political manifesto for the district; for which afterwards I was of course both sorry and glad." Three days later, "I read my political manifesto to Dawson and Edmund Leigh with great effect. The printing of it was put in hand instantly." He notes a little later "slight signs last night on the part of the wire pullers to soften down my manifesto, but I refused to do so." It is significant that his political enthusiasm becomes apparent only in times of political crisis, for the manifesto he wrote was, of course, prompted by the approaching general election of January 1910, which followed upon the Lords' rejection of the Lloyd George budget of 1909. He wrote an article on "The Forces Behind the Election" for Ford Madox Ford's *English Review*. He was plainly as excited politically at this time as he could be, but ten days after the poll he notes : "I got so absorbed in my novel that the elections ceased to excite and disgust me" ; and he adds: "I ought to do a **brief account of my own psychological state during the**

elections. In some ways it had the faults shown by the Tory mentality."

It seems, in fact, that he could endure the excitement of politics only for brief periods ; reaction against its heady nature soon set in, and detachment re-asserted itself. For, after all, to be swept off his feet, even in the cause of justice, was opposed to the ideal of objectivity. And besides—it was the great discovery of Edwin Clayhanger's life—"Injustice was a tremendous actuality ! It had to be faced and accepted." Bennett, as a socialist in the heyday of Fabianism and as an admirer of the Webbs, may have been convinced of the inevitability of gradualness; he certainly did not construe gradualness as faster than a snail's pace.

"Injustice was a tremendous actuality ! It had to be faced and accepted." The sentiment is Clayhanger's, but it is fair to assume that it was Bennett's before him. It is the key to his view of life. He was a stoic, not a passionate, protesting idealist, like Wells, who often bears a curious resemblance to a cockney Shelley, and all that is best in his little books of practical philosophy comes from Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. They are, indeed, those little books *The Reasonable Life, How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day, The Human Machine, Self and Self-Management* and the rest, designed to persuade the reader to make the best of the life that has been given him and not kick against the pricks. No view of life could less inspire a man towards political enthusiasm and political action. Mr. V. S. Pritchett, in his essay on Bennett in *The Living Novel*, the most perceptive study of Bennett yet written, isolates "a sentence in the early pages of *The Clayhanger Family* which contains a volume of criticism on him. He is writing of young Edwin Clayhanger coming home from his last day at school in the

Five Towns: \* It seemed rather a shame," Bennett says of Edwin ' it seemed even tragic, that this naive, simple creature, immaculate of worldly experience, must soon be transformed into a man wary, incredulous and detracting.' " And Mr. Pritchett comments: " The essence of Bennett's mind is packed into that awkward sentence with its crick in the neck at the feeble beginning and the give-away of its three final words."

Bennett's, then, cannot be considered an inspiring view of life. There is at the most a heroism in the endurance of the frustrations of life ; like *Clayhanger*, Bennett " was penetrated to the marrow by the disastrous and yet beautiful infelicity of things." He had, as he noted himself, no interest in metaphysics, and in any philosophy that went beyond moral maxims he was illiterate. In religion he was a Victorian agnostic with a cautious belief in material progress ; when he attempts to write of religious experience, as in *The Glimpse*, he is disastrously and embarrassingly vulgar, as indeed he always is when he attempts to transcend the boundaries of his native vision ; no one has written better of a normal married affection, as in *Clayhanger*, than he, none less convincingly or more novelettishly of romantic sexual passion, as in *Sacred and Profane Love*, which must be almost the most tasteless novel ever written by a major noveHst. He recognises the truth himself when he writes in 1908 :

I see that at bottom, I have an intellectual scorn, or the scorn of an intellectual man, for all sexual physical manifestations. They seem childish to me, unnecessary symptoms and symbols of a spiritual phenomenon. (Yet few Englishmen could be more perversely curious and adventurous than I am in just those manifestations) I can feel myself despising them at the very moment of deriving satisfaction from diem, as if I were playing at being a child. And even as regards spiritual affection, I do

not like to think that I am dependent spiritually, to even a slight degree, on anyone. I do not like to think that I am not absolutely complete and sufficient in myself to myself I could not ask for a caress, except as a matter of form, and to save the *amour propre* of her who I knew was anxious to confer it.

It may be doubted whether, "at bottom," the reason for his dislike of "sexual-physical manifestations" was anything so simple as intellectual scorn.

Fundamentally, Bennett's attitude towards life, the universe and himself was aesthetic. "I enjoyed all this," he writes towards the end of his story *The Matador of the Five Towns*, "All this seemed to me to be fine, seemed to throw off the true, fine, romantic savour of life. I would have altered nothing in it. Mean, harsh, ugly, squalid, crude, barbaric—yes, but what an intoxicating sense in it of the organised vitality of a vast community unconscious of itself! I would have altered nothing even in the events of the night." It is the attitude, as emerges even more clearly in the context of the story, of the spectator, the onlooker who is not himself implicated. "The romantic savour of life" : *Savour of Life* is the title of one of his collections of essays : "romantic" was a favourite word. Another, as significant, and used with monotonous iteration throughout the novels, is "phenomena." At the outset of his career as a novelist, in 1899, he writes in the journal :

To find beauty, which is always hidden ; that is the aim. . . . My desire is to depict the deeper beauty while abiding by the envelope of facts. At the worst, the facts should not be ignored. They might, for the sake of more clearly disclosing the beauty, suffer a certain *distortion*—I can't think of a better word. Indeed, they cannot be ignored in the future. The achievements of the finest French writers, with Turgenev and Tolstoy, have set a standard for all coming masters of fiction.

What the artist has to grasp is that there is no such thing as

ugliness in the world. This I believe to be true, but perhaps the saying would sound less difficult in another form : All ugliness has an aspect of beauty. This business of the artist is to find that aspect.

It is an admirable description of Bennett's aims as an artist, aims he fully realised in his best fiction. But the next entry in the journal is as follows :

You can find a certain wide romance even in the January sales at the draper's shop. My mother bought some very large unbleached linen sheets to-day for our cottage at Milford. They cost is. 11½d. each and are 3¼ yards in length. She was told that these sheets are woven by Russian peasants by hand. They are sold to the French War Office, used during the annual military manoeuvres, and after the wear of a month or so, are sold by the French Government to English traders. So it comes that I may sleep between linen that has passed through the hands of the most miserable and unhappy people in Europe—Russian peasants and French conscripts.

Here he is using the word "romance" in its journalistic sense and that is the sense in which he often employs it. He \* notes in *Journalism for Women* : "The born journalist comes into the world with a fixed notion that nothing under the sun is uninteresting. His notions are a pathetic, gigantic fallacy, but to him they are real." It is not at all the same thing as saying : "there is no such thing as ugliness in the world," as Bennett qualifies the proposition. But besides being an artist, and perhaps he became an artist by the exercise of will-power and the practice of constant emulation, Bennett was certainly a born journalist; and when imagination flags or is working at the low level of the fantasies, then it is not hidden beauty for which he is searching but merely the journalistically interesting which he is finding all too easily, so that ultimately one thing becomes as interesting as another, proportion vanishes, and "phenom-

ena," the superficial aspects of our civilisation, become valuable for their own sakes. Blake said : " Everything that lives is holy." Bennett might have said : " Everything that exists is interesting." But everything that exists is not equally interesting, and this, possibly, as M. Lafourcade suggests, because of his training as a journalist, Bennett does not always remember. The failure to do so reaches its apotheosis in that gigantic epic of dullness *Imperial Palace*.

Bennett's career as a novelist extended for more than thirty years, but except for one flash in the later years of life the work by which he will be remembered was all written during the first half of that time. It is fascinating, though futile, to speculate on what he might have done had there been no 1914-1918 war or had he not been caught up in it. By the autumn of 1914 he had written twenty-two works of fiction of all kinds, the fantasias and light novels outnumbering the serious novels by two to one ; and his big work had all appeared since 1908. He was, one would surely have said in 1914, merely on the threshold of his real career as a novelist. It is scarcely possible not to see him as a war casualty. In 1914 Bennett was a brilliant novelist; after 1914 he was generally no more than a brilliant journalist.

The immediate effects of the war on Bennett's career are tabulated in the Journal entry for August 13, 1914 :

Serial publication of *The Price of Love* suspended in *Daily News*, ostensibly on account of paper famine.

Book publication of ditto indefinitely postponed.

Other autumn books probably ditto.

Vedrenne announced to-day that autumn tours of *Milestones*, if railways permitted them to go out at all, would be a heavy loss, and would I forgo my fees ? I declined. . . .

Receipts of *The Great Adventure* at the Kingsway showed a fall of about £500 on the previous week.

The tale is taken up in the next entry, for August 17 :

Yesterday, a request from the *Daily News* to write on the war. To-day, ditto from *Everybody's Mag.* Yesterday, inspired somewhat by *D. N.'s* request, I wrote an article on "What The German Conscript Thinks."

From then on, though he was to finish *These Twain*, the third part of the *Clayhanger Family*, he was almost totally immersed in war activities. He was very early appointed military representative on the Thorpe Division Emergency Committee, he was a member of the Wounded Allies Relief Committee, and he was active in propaganda. In 1915 he was sent on a tour of the front in Flanders. On May 1, 1918, he was appointed by Lord Beaverbrook, then Minister of Information, head of British propaganda in France. He had become a man of action. He writes, at this time : " I have now abandoned literature until either I am chucked out of the job or the job ends, or I am called to a better one. But I do journalism, and a damned nuisance it is. Two articles this week. Three next week." He was indeed called to a better job ; when Beaverbrook resigned in October 1918, Bennett became acting head of the Ministry. The best comment of these war years, from the point of view of his work as a writer, is a list of the books written and published during them : *Liberty, a Statement of the British Case; Over There: War Scenes on the Western Front; These Twain; The Lions Share; The Pretty Lady; The Roll Call; Self and Self-Management*; of which *These Twain* alone has literary value.

With the peace, it is true, books began to pour from the press again, a full thirty of them in ten years. But only with three of them, *Riceman Steps, Lord Raingo* and *Imperial*

*Palace*, does he show the self-absorption and single-mindedness that characterised his attitude while writing his Edwardian novels. Of his last ten years one's final impression is of a man bound down under the tyranny of things, perpetually tired, often ill, striving despite his enormous worldly success to make both ends meet. In 1921 he was legally separated from his wife and undertook to pay her a large allowance. Soon after he met Miss Dorothy Cheston, an actress, who later took the name of Bennett by deed poll. She bore him a daughter, whereupon he sold his yacht (" You can't have a baby and a yacht," he wrote), and went to live with him as his wife at 75 Cadogan Square. In 1930, he moved into two flats converted into one at Chiltern Court, Baker Street. His journals and letters of this period are full of complaints about money. He was struggling with the writing of *Imperial Palace*, which, as M. Lafourcade rightly says, for three years he dragged with him " like an incubus." For all his high ambitions for the book, his care in its preparation, it was a still-born monster. That it should be so was a kind of fate. " His life makes it perfectly clear that it is the objective rather than the subjective value which plays the greater role as the determining factor of his consciousness " ; the words are Jung's, describing the extraverted type ; but the great psychologist might have been describing Bennett. The almost complete absence of the subjective in his journals, his constant preoccupation with, to use his own favourite word, the " phenomena " of life, " things," his shying away from the manifestations of emotion, his emphasis on the need for worldly success as one finds it in the little manuals on " mental efficiency," the exploitations of his stammer and the careful producing, in the theatrical sense, of his personal idiosyncrasies and his taste in clothes in the

interests of a social manner (" a frankly imitatory accommodation to surrounding circumstances," Jung would call it), even the half-hearted nature of his socialism, all these point the extent and depth of his extraversion. And in the end—it is more apparent in *Imperial Palace* than in the late luxury fantasies like *Accident* and *The Strange Vanguard*—he succumbed entirely to " the extravert's danger" ; he became, the words again are Jung's, " caught up in objects, wholly losing himself in their toils,"

In 1930, *Imperial Palace* was finished and published. A few months later he caught typhoid fever through drinking water from a carafe in a Paris restaurant. He was brought back to England, where he lay ill for three months. In his delirium, according to Geoffrey West, he believed he was back in the Paris of 1908, writing *The Old Wives' Tale*. He kept on demanding his hotel bill. On March 27, 1931, he died.

## CHAPTER II

### THE EARLY NOVELS

**B**ENNETT, alone or in collaboration, wrote some forty-one novels and volumes of short stories. Half of them represent the *Tit-Bits* side of his personality and are worthless ; they are unlikely ever again to be read by anybody for pleasure and will be mentioned in this study only in as far as they throw light on his other work. Of the score or so books that remain the majority, and those the best and most characteristic, deal with life in the Five Towns, the constituents of the modern city of Stoke-on-Trent which are called by Bennett: Turnhill (Tunstall), Bursley (Burslem), Hanbridgc(Hanley), Knype (Stoke-upon-Trent), and Longshaw (Longton), with Oldcastle (Newcastle-under-Lyme) as a sixth town suppressed in order to preserve the euphony of the descriptive phrase. He is, then, first and foremost a regional novelist.

But it is worth noting that Bennett was not the first novelist to set his scene in the pottery towns of North Staffordshire. In 1883 George Moore, in quest of material for his second novel *A Mummer's Wife*, joined an operatic company touring the provinces with *Les Cloches de Corneville* and spent some weeks in Hanley and other Midland and northern industrial towns; and Hanley he chose as the background of his novel, not, one suspects, out of any intrinsic interest in Hanley itself but because it was as repellent, as hideously provincial, a town as he could find. It is natural, if futile, to speculate if Bennett ever saw that

production of *Les Cloches de Corneville* in Hanley, **but** lie certainly knew, by the time he was settled in London, the novel in which George Moore set down his experiences and observations of the town. *A Mummer's Wife* remains an impressive work. In the 'nineties, and for Bennett especially, it must have been even more so. For at that time Moore, the friend of Zola and the disciple of Flaubert—*A Mummer's Wife* is a not unsuccessful attempt to fuse *Madame Bovary* with *L'Assommoir*—was the only novelist in England who was attempting to write fiction in the manner of the French writers whom Bennett so greatly admired. He looked upon Moore, as may be seen from his early book *Fame and Fiction*, with the reverence due to an immediate ancestor. In *A Drama in Muslin* Moore had written : " Seen from afar, all things are of equal worth and the meanest things when viewed with the eye of God are raised to heights of tragic awe which conventionality would limit to the deaths of kings and patriots," a sentence which describes Bennett's own early attitude to the subject-matter of fiction and which he calls " the most notable and dignified utterance upon the function of the novel." Seeing, then, the respect in which Bennett held Moore, we may the more easily imagine what his excitement must have been on first reading *A Mummer's Wife*. We cannot say that if Moore had not written that novel Bennett would not have written his Five Towns books ; but it is certainly reasonable to think that finding Hanley celebrated in the work of the English novelist whose aims were most akin to his own must have given him added confidence in his ambition to record the life of his native district in fiction. This seems the more likely since we know, from Wells, Bennett's excitement at **the** appearance of the Potteries in *The Time Machine*. Moore, **and**

to a lesser degree *Wells*, brought home to him the validity of his subject-matter and gave him the authority with which to proceed. At the very least their example must have greatly diminished the sense of loneliness which every unknown young artist from the provinces must feel in the presence of his self-appointed task.

Moore's rendering of the Potteries is not of course Bennett's. It is a background and not much more ; he might for his purpose as well have chosen one of the Black Country towns to the south or one of the Lancashire cotton towns to the north ; he makes no attempt to render the speech of the Five Towns, much less the essence of life there. He was not in any sense attempting a regional novel. But Bennett is precisely concerned with this, with the delineation of life in one particular environment, an environment so marked, so much *sui generis*, as powerfully to condition the characters of the men and women born and brought up in it ; he describes, in other words, a special sort of men and women, men and women whose personalities have been moulded by the impress of a strongly individualised, strongly localised community. Within this chosen scene the characters he deals with are mainly of the lower middle class socially but economically of the local ruling class, men and women for the most part fiercely and obstinately preoccupied with money and property, often to the point of miserliness. In the work of no other English novelist, perhaps of no other European novelist apart from Balzac, do property and money play so large a part, and it is not beside the point to note that in Bennett's delineation of this singularly graceless community the characters who are aware of civilisation, who are not exclusively concerned with property and money, tend to find themselves involved in the end in financial disaster ;

one remembers the Orgreaves in *The Clayhanger Family*, The concern for property and money sets the limits, then, of Bennett's picture of Five Towns life. Within those limits his favourite themes are indicated in the following sentence from *Sacred and Profane Love* : " There are only two fundamental differences in the world—the difference between sex and sex, and the difference between youth and age." To these must be added a preoccupation with illness and death ; the whole seen and felt in the light of an intense awareness of the passage of time, the passage of time in the most purely chronological sense. There is, of course, an obvious relationship between an obsession with money and an obsession with time.

It is significant that for the only major work he produced when he went outside the area of the Five Towns, *Riceyman Steps*, he chose a district of London, Clerkenwell, as grimy and unsplendid almost as the Potteries themselves and found there the same quality of miserliness and its undoing by illness and physical decay that had been so deeply impressed upon him in his native environment.

All the same, Bennett is a regional novelist with a difference. In this connection we may think of a much greater novelist, Hardy. Hardy was of Wessex, and remained of Wessex, in a way Bennett was never of the Five Towns. For Hardy, Wessex was the universe and we accept it as a microcosm of the universe. It does not enter our heads to think of it as provincial or limited in time to the period of the 1840s any more than our first thought of *Lear* is that it has its action in pre-Saxon Britain. But for Bennett the Five Towns were always provincial; he left them when he was twenty-one, and never lived in them again as a native or for more than a few days at a time. Steeped as he was in them, in

their atmosphere, history and traditions, as a writer he was completely outside them, and as a writer his attitude towards them is always expository ; he is explaining them, exhibiting them, to the outside world which is not provincial. Perhaps he had to go outside them to become conscious of them, for all the time they exist implicitly in relation to a larger world which Bennett accepts as a norm, whereas for Hardy the norm was Wessex itself. The Five Towns are seen, therefore, as strictly eccentric to the main centres of culture. Mr. Pritchett has noted that one of Bennett's favourite words was " detracting," and in some ways Bennett's attitude to the Five Towns is detracting. The result is, though *The Old Wives' Tale* transcends the Five Towns, what we get in the Five Towns novels is a picture of the provinces. The picture is true just because it is of the provinces, while in Hardy the picture of life is true not simply because it is of Wessex. At his best Bennett does achieve a universality of a kind, but it is not Hardy's kind. It is a limited universality. We can say : Yes, this is a picture of life not only in the Five Towns, but in any provincial industrial community of England and America during the last three decades of the nineteenth century ; but we cannot say more than this. We are given, with great skill and with great accuracy, a picture true for a certain kind of community at a certain point in time. It is a great achievement, but one not in the category of the greatest. It is only in a few passages in *The Old Wives' Tale* and *The Clayhanger Family* that we are brought face to face not merely with the human situation at a given date in a given place in North Staffordshire but with the eternal human situation. And this means that though in two or three books Bennett is a master he is nevertheless not more than a minor master.

Bennett's conception of the novel did not remain constant. In 1897 he writes in the *Journal*:

The novelist of contemporary manners needs to be saturated with a sense of the picturesque in modern things. Walking down Edith Grove this afternoon, I observed the vague, mysterious beauty of the vista of houses and bare trees melting imperceptibly into a distance of grey fog. And then, in King's Road, the figures of tradesmen at shopdoors, or children romping or stealing along mournfully, of men and women each totally different from every other, and all serious wrapt up in their own thoughts and ends—these seemed curiously strange and novel and wonderful. Every sense, even the commonest, is wonderful, if only one can detach oneself, casting off all memory of use and custom, and behold it (as it were) for the first time ; in its right, authentic colours; without making comparisons. The novelist should cherish and burnish this faculty of seeing crudely, simply, ardently, ignorantly ; of seeing like a baby or a lunatic, who lives each moment by itself and tarnishes the present by no remembrance of the past.

To this passage, with its obvious affinity with, indeed reminiscence of, Maupassant's account of his debt to Flaubert, must be added the following extract from an entry made exactly a year later. Bennett, criticising the great Victorian novelists for their lack of interest in form and composition, writes : " An artist must be interested primarily in presentment, not in the thing presented. He must have a passion for technique, a deep love of form." Together, the two passages tell us not only what Bennett derived from the French but also why it was necessary for him to go to the French. It is not fashion but inevitability which prompts every generation of novelists in turn to renounce and denounce the generation of novelists that has gone before it. In 1924 Mrs. Woolf wrote in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* : . . . the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts

had this great difficulty to face—that there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business.” She was attacking Bennett's conception of the novel; but substituting 1890 for 1910, Bennett could have made the same statement with equal truth. For Bennett's problem, utterly different from Mrs. Woolf's twenty years later, was to find out how to add to the territory of the English novel a whole new province that had to all intents and purposes up to then been no man's land; how to take into fiction the industrial scene. One says this without forgetting that Dickens had penetrated into the Black Country in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and into Lancashire in *Hard Times* or that Mrs. Gaskell had written *North and South* and *Mary Barton* and Disraeli *Sybil*. But these could be no help to Bennett. Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell and Disraeli were all southerners and of an earlier generation, for whom the industrial revolution was something new and different, frightening, an affront and a threat, the industrial towns, centres of power but also breeding places of the greatest misery. Coketown presented them with a moral challenge, which they took up with fervour. But for Bennett, Coketown, or the Coketown that he knew, Hanley and the other Pottery towns, was neither new, frightening, nor an affront; it was the perfectly familiar; home. What was different was what lay outside its boundaries. The country, for example, was different—Mr. Harvey Darton has pointed out how little awareness there is in the Five Towns novels of the beautiful countryside that surrounds the Potteries; and so was the south. Of course, Bennett knew that it was ugly, though he probably did not conceive the full measure of its ugliness until he was well away from it. But no matter how unpromising the environment the mind—at any rate a certain kind of mind,

of which Bennett was one—craves for beauty, must find beauty and, where beauty is lacking, will create it for itself. This is what Bennett set out to do, and he was able to do it because of what he learned from the French, that beauty lay not in the matter presented but in the manner in which it was presented. It was a discovery that made possible the Five Towns novels and it gave Bennett the strength that comes to a writer on his realising that he is not alone in what he aims at doing but is working with all the sanction of an established tradition behind him.

Once confirmed in self-confidence, he could move away from the French influence. *The Old Wives' Tale*, for example, has a wholly un-French delight in eccentricity of character which leaves one wondering what he might have done had it been possible for him to work in the tradition of Dickens. And later, by 1914, when he published *The Author's Crafty* he was forced to the conclusion that, "with the single exception of Turgenev, the great novelists of the world, according to my own standards, have either ignored technique or have failed to understand it. . . . Any tutor in a college for teaching the whole art of fiction by post in twelve lessons could show where Dostoevsky was clumsy and careless. What would have been Flaubert's detailed criticism of that book ("the sublime, the unapproachable Brothers Karamazov," "a hasty, amorphous lump of gold")? And what would it matter?" By 1914, it will be apparent, Flaubert, Maupassant and Zola are no longer among the great novelists of the world according to his own standards; their places have been taken by Fielding, Hardy, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. All the same, it is significant that when, in the early nineteen twenties, after seven years spent largely in propaganda and journalism, the administration of a Govern-

ment department and the writing of cheap and sensational fiction, he again essayed a *serious novel* in *Riceyman Steps*, he returned to an older mode and produced a severely classical work in the French manner.

Bennett wrote four important novels before *The Old Wives Tale : A Man from the North, Anna of the Five Towns, Leonora* and *Whom God Hath Joined*. They are all, in varying degree and with varying success, experimental. The least typical, in the light of his mature work, is naturally enough his first, *A Man from the North* ; and the finest, *Anna of the Five Towns*. Very different though these books are, both have qualities in common not found in the later books. One does not normally think of Bennett as a stylist; indeed, there is some evidence that he was a little touchy about the whole problem of style. " Style," he writes in his little book *Literary Taste*, " cannot be distinguished from matter." Style is a highly metaphysical subject; but in fact one is continually distinguishing it from matter. Certainly Bennett's first masters the French naturalists were : was it not Flaubert who dreamed of writing a novel without a subject, in which style should be all ? The idea of style, however, style as something existing in its own right, above and beyond subject-matter, was not among the enduring influences of the French on Bennett. But that he was for a time under its influence many passages in die early journals show ; as do *A Man from the North* and *Anna of the Five Towns*. They indicate, *Anna of the Five Towns* especially, what Bennett might have done had he remained under their influence. *A Man from the North* is, as it were, a marginal work, a Five Towns novel by extension: its hero, Richard Larch, a relation of that aristocratic family of the Potteries, the Clayton-Vernons, whom we are to meet in the later books,

comes up to London from Burslem, to work in a *solicitor's office* and, he hopes, become an author ; an author, what is more, in the manner of the French naturalists. Larch, is in other words, a picture of the young Bennett with all his ambitions, his zest for the London scene, for the world of culture, as he might easily have been if he had had neither talent nor enduring ambition. For Richard's fate is to fail to marry the girl who might have helped towards the realisation of his ambitions and to marry instead a cockney waitress who quite signally will not do so for the good reason that she will never understand them ; as he realises himself, for he does not even tell her of them. It is a study of frustration, but of frustration easily accepted. As Richard goes to meet his future wife's relations for the first time, he sees Laura's sister, in whom " the last resistance of departing youthfulness and vivacity against the narcotic of dull, unlovely domesticity were taking place," and realises that Laura will be like her in a few years' time :

He recognised that, while he bore all the aspect of prosperity, he had failed. Why had nature deprived him of strength of purpose ? Why could not he, like other men, bend circumstances to his own ends ? . . . He would keep his eyes on the immediate foreground and be happy while he could. After all, perhaps things had been ordered for the best; perhaps he had no genuine talent for writing. . . . He heard the trot of the child behind him. Children. . . . Perhaps a child of his might give sign of literary ability. If so—and surely these instincts descended, were not lost—how he would foster and encourage it !

So the book ends. It is slight, it has few of the qualities **that** we associate with Bennett. It is tentative work, **that of a man** who has yet to find himself. But it remains **an attractive work**, because of its seriousness and honesty.

Since *A Man from the North* there have been so many first novels about sensitive young men from the provinces with literary ambitions. For the most part they have been exercises in wishful thinking. *A Man from the North* conspicuously is not. It is distinguished by an admirable detachment and lack of presumption, and by an austerity and quietness of style that Bennett was soon to lose.

*Anna of the Five Towns* is not at all a marginal book, nor is it tentative. It leads us directly and immediately into the heart of the Five Towns and because of this, because of the identity of background, critics have been drawn into assuming that it is merely a precursor of *The Old Wives Tale* and *The Clayhanger Family*. In fact, it can exist in its own right, without reference to those novels. It is not simply a pointer to later excellence but itself an achievement in excellence. Of its kind it is a masterpiece, and it has never received its due in attention or praise because the kind is a kind that is not usually Bennett's. A quotation descriptive and critical of his later work will help us to isolate the kind of book *Anna of the Five Towns* is. The especial quality that Henry James found in Bennett (as also in Wells) is, he tells us in his essay "The New Novel," published in 1914, "saturation . . . and as to be saturated is to be documented, to be able on occasion to prove quite enviably and potently so, they are alike in the authority that creates emulation." He continues :

When the author of *Clayhanger* has put down upon the table, in dense unconfused array, every fact required, every fact in any way invocable, to make the life of the Five Towns press upon us, we may very well go on for the time in the captive condition, the beguiled and bemused condition, the acknowledgement of which is in general our highest tribute to the temporary master of our sensibility. Nothing at such moments

—or rather at the end of them, when the end begins to threaten—may be of a more curious strain than the dawning unrest that suggests to us fairly our first critical comment: "Yes, yes—but is this *all*? These are the circumstances of the interest—we see, we see; but where is the interest itself, where and what is its centre, and how are we to measure it in relation to *that*?"

Bennett sought in *The Old Wives' Tale* and *The Clayhanger Family* to unroll the panorama of life in time through all the tiny detailed incidents of its thousand acts. His is the very opposite of the dramatic method. James compares it to "the many-fingered grasp of the orange that the author squeezes," and for him the novels of Bennett and Wells and their immediate followers, Walpole, Cannan, Compton Mackenzie and Lawrence, were scarcely novels at all, were little more than the raw material of novels. They lacked the rigorous selection, the dramatic presentation, the organisation from a single point of view and a narrow angle of vision, which distinguishes his own fiction and that of Conrad, whom significantly he sets up against Wells and Bennett in the essay from which I have quoted. For James the interest of a novel lay precisely in the relation of the subject to a centre; and James's conception of the novel is one that has produced much beautiful work, work of a quite distinctive order of beauty. It is a conception that has been most persuasively argued by Mr. Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction* and asserted again only the other day by Mr. Robert Liddell in his *A Treatise on the Novel*, the theme of which may be stated in terms of a parody of Pater's famous proposition: all fiction aspires to the condition of Miss Compton-Burnett's novels. It is, indeed, a conception that needs constant re-statement, for the novel tends always towards formlessness, towards the appearance, as someone has said, of a gladstone

bag into which any amount of extraneous matter may be crammed. But at the most it represents only a partial truth, as James himself comes near to admitting when he recognises that Bennett and Wells "derive, by multiplied if diluted transmissions, from the great Russians"; the fact being that if one adopts James's standpoint then nine-tenths of what we regard as the world's great fiction, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Stendhal and the Victorians included, have to be thrown overboard. A name other than that of novel must be found for their products.

But it is indicative of the especial quality of *Anna of the Five Towns* that James's criticism of Bennett's later novels does not apply to it. It has a centre and a central character in relation to which everything in the book exists: it is a highly organised composition dramatically presented. *Anna* is seen from a comparatively narrow angle of vision, presented not full-face as are the characters in the later books, but from the point of view implicit in the most moving last pages of the novel:

She had promised to marry Mynors, and she married him. Nothing else was possible. She who had never failed in duty did not fail then. She who had always submitted and bowed the head, submitted and bowed the head then. She had sucked in with her mother's milk the profound truth that a woman's life is always a renunciation, greater or less. Hers by chance was greater. . . .

It was Flaubert's habit—and M. Mauriac has rebuked him for blasphemy for it—to compare the novelist in creation to God. If the analogy is correct, the nature of the work resulting from the novelist's hand will obviously depend upon his notion of God. Bennett, who was certainly following Flaubert in *Anna*, had no doubt about his. He had

written in the journal: "Essential characteristic of the really great novelist: a Christ-like, all-embracing compassion." *Anna of the Five Towns* is an exercise in compassion. The story is simple enough, and everything is subordinated to it. Anna, brought up to render implicit obedience to her father the miser Ephraim Tellwright who had once grown "garrulous with God at prayer-meetings" but later rose supreme in "the finance of salvation . . . in the negotiation of mortgages, the artful arrangement of the incidence of collections, the manufacture of special appeals, the planning of anniversaries and of mighty revivals . . . the interminable alternation of debt-raising and new liability which provides a lasting excitement for Nonconformists," inherits her mother's money when she comes of age and at Tellwright's behest becomes a sleeping partner *in* the pottery of Henry Mynors, a young and rising business man who is a pillar of Methodism. Among Anna's other property is the factory of Titus Price, the Sunday school superintendent. Mynors falls in love with her, proposes, and Anna accepts him; only to realise when it is too late that it is Willy Price she loves, the pathetic and much scorned youth who has committed forgery in an effort to save his father, whom Tellwright and other creditors have driven to suicide.

The story is firmly set in terms of Methodism, not a faith for which Bennett felt any sympathy. But he treats it with absolute fairness, for Methodism is an integral part of the community in which his action takes place, the channel of its spiritual and cultural aspirations. He treats, too, the characters with scrupulous fairness: the scales are never weighted for them or against them. A character like Mynors, for instance, is given great natural dignity; it would have been easy to have made him marry Anna simply for her money;

but no, for all his pleasure in marrying the most considerable heiress in the Five Towns, he truly loves her. Even the grotesque Titus Price achieves dignity in the hour of his death :

Here was a man whom no one respected, but everyone pretended to respect—who knew that he was respected by none, but pretended that he was respected by all; whose whole career was made up of dissimulations : religious, moral and social. If any man could have been trusted to continue the decent sham to the end, and to preserve the general self-esteem, surely it was this man. But no ! Suddenly abandoning the imposture, he transgresses openly, brazenly ; and, snatching a bit of hemp cries: " Behold me ; this is real human nature. This is the truth ; the rest was lies. I lied ; you lied. I confess it, and you shall confess it." Such a thunderclap shakes the very base of the microcosm.

One would pick out especially the charming Mrs. Sutton, the only truly sympathetic study of a religious person in all Bennett's works. But excellent as all these characters are, as the miser Tellwright is, the triumph of the novel is Anna, that compound of honesty, innocence, humility and pride who cannot bring herself to be publicly saved at the revival, and who in the greatest moment of her life can flout her upbringing and defy her father out of sheer compassion for Willy Price.

In *Anna of the Five Towns*, for the first and only time in his life, Bennett was writing at the tragic level. Later, he was to find that life was " rather a shame," though certainly he was to find it much else as well. The provincialism of *Anna* is no less evident than that of *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*, but the final impression *Anna* makes is not one of provincialism. Bennett planned the novel while he was still unknown as a writer, and perhaps he was naive then,

still near enough in time to his life in the Five Towns to see them as the natural, perfectly normal scene of life. So in *Anna*, despite the description of the pot bank, for instance, he is not exhibiting the Five Towns to an outside world, as he does later ; he takes them for granted ; they are simply his *mise-en-scene*, as Wessex was for Hardy or Warwickshire for George Eliot. There is a passage descriptive of Bursley early in the book which is significant in more ways than one :

Bursley, the ancient home of the potter, has an antiquity of a thousand years. It lies towards the north end of an extensive valley, which must have been one of the fairest spots in Alfred's England, but which is now defaced by the activities of a quarter of a million people. Five contiguous towns—Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, and Longshaw—united by a single winding thoroughfare some eight miles in length, have inundated the valley like a succession of great lakes. Of these five Bursley is the mother, but Hanbridge is the largest. They are mean and forbidding of aspect—sombre, hard-featured, uncouth ; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding country till there is no village lane within a league but what offers a gaunt and ludicrous travesty of natural charms. Nothing could be more prosaic than the huddled, red-brown streets; nothing more seemingly remote from romance. Yet be it said that romance is even here—the romance which, for those who have an eye to perceive it, ever dwells amid the seats of industrial manufacture, softening the coarseness, transfiguring the squalor, of these mighty alchemical operations. Look down into the valley from this terrace-height where love is kindling, embrace the whole smoke-girt amphitheatre in a glance, and it may be that you will suddenly comprehend the secret and superb significance of the vast Doing which goes forward below. Because they seldom think, the townsmen take shame when indicted for having disfigured half a county in order to live. They have not understood that this disfigurement is merely an episode in the unending warfare of man and nature, and calls for no contrition. Here, indeed,

## THE EARLY NCH

is nature repaid for some of her imperiously bids man sustain and is one of the places where in the very act of obedience she wounds and maltreats her.

Out beyond the municipal confines, where the subsidiary industries of coal and iron prosper amid a wreck of verdure, the struggle is grim, appalling, heroic—so ruthless is his havoc of her, so indomitable her ceaseless recuperation. On the one side is a wresting from nature's own bowels of the means to waste her ; on the other, an undismayed, enduring fortitude. The grass grows; though it is not green, it grows. In the very heart of the valley, hedged about with furnaces, a farm still stands, and at harvest time the sooty sheaves are gathered in.

It is prose of a kind that Bennett would not have written much later than *Anna of the Five Towns* ; with its poeticisms, its heavily latinised vocabulary, it is much more literary, more rhetorical, more formal than his later style. Akin to the prose of Hardy and Gissing, it reminds us that *Anna of the Five Towns*, though published in the first years of the twentieth, was written in the nineteenth century. Writing of *The Clayhanger Family*, Mr. Pritchett has said : " Bennett's gift as a novelist is to abolish the role of the spectator." This is true for the later books, as it is true for most novelists since Bennett. The aim of such novelists as Joyce, Lawrence, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, has been to express character in itself and the end of their style to expose the naked working of the mind, "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen." The results have been impressive, but inevitably much has been lost, in particular the detachment, the standing-back on the part of the author, essential to a tragic conception of character. Bennett was never a graceful writer, and as prose the passage quoted could easily be criticised, as could much of Hardy's. But its dignity confers dignity on the subject-matter ; it enlarges

the characters, not reduces them ; while its content sets them not only in a locality but also in history and in a universal struggle ; just as the dramatic method of presentation that Bennett adopts produces the most moving impact on the reader that he was ever to achieve, the most moving because the point of view and the emphasis disengage the story to a greater degree than in any of his other novels from the diminishing effects of the local and temporal.

None of the three serious novels that lie between *Anna of the Five Towns* and *The Old Wives' Tale* exists in the same class ; while *Sacred and Profane Love* is best forgotten as a disastrous blunder, a signal example of what may happen to a novelist when he goes outside the range of his talent and experience. It is a dreadfully vulgar, tasteless work. For all that *in* it Bennett sacrificed art to propaganda, *Whom God Hath Joined* is a much more worthy book. It is an attack on the publicity attending divorce cases, and the message emerges with all the nakedness of a leading article. Thus, after the girl Annunciata Fearn has collapsed in the witness-box while giving evidence against her father, Mark Ridware comments as follows to the solicitor :

" It would have upset a man, to say nothing of a young girl. . . . It's a most singular thing that some sorts of divorce cases can be heard in private, and others can't. If the case is likely to upset the susceptibilities of the public, then the judge will clear the court like anything. But if the public is only likely to upset the susceptibilities of the parties principally concerned, the judge is powerless. How do you justify that ? And then there's the newspapers. They ought not to be allowed to print reports of divorce cases. As things are, some of the most respectable papers in London, papers that are like people who wouldn't miss going to church on Sundays for untold gold, make a speciality of divorce cases; live on them indeed, except in the silly season, when they have to find other food. , , . The

truth is that justice is sacrificed to the lascivious tastes of the great enlightened British public. If that girl had been put in a room with the judge and the lawyers and nobody else, especially no reporters and no loafers, she wouldn't have had to go through what she did."

Bennett can scarcely be said to work out his thesis in terms of flesh and blood. Not content with one action for divorce, he gives us two, most improbably linked together. Lawrence Ridware, an admitted clerk in the office of Charlie Fearn, the Hanbridge solicitor, finding his wife unfaithful to him, decides to divorce her ; not long before Fearn himself, a full-blooded sensualist who womanises as other men drink, is sued for divorce by his wife because of his adultery with his children's French governess. The characterisation is inevitably distorted in order to fit the purposes of this unspeakably neat and mechanical plot, which is further complicated by the courses the two actions for divorce take : *in* Ridware's the court decides it has no jurisdiction since Ridware, an illegitimate son, is technically domiciled in Scotland ; while Mrs. Fearn in the end withdraws her petition in order to spare the feelings of her daughter, the chief witness against her father. The novel is sometimes moving, and the character of Mrs. Fearn is excellently drawn ; but as a whole *Whom God Hath Joined* suffers from all the faults of the *toman a these*.

Despite the melodramatic plot imposed upon it, *Leonora*, published in 1903, three years before *Whom God Hath Joined*\* is a much more important link in the chain of Bennett's development. In theme at any rate it partly foreshadows *The Old Wives' Tale*. It is the story of the sudden falling *in* love at forty of Leonora, the wife of an apparently prosperous but unscrupulously crooked Five Towns manufacturer who

embezzles, all but murders and finally commits suicide, and the mother of three adolescent daughters. Bennett seems to have seen the novel as a deliberate challenge to conventional notions of romance and romantic love. Leonora, a brilliant and solid creation, dominates the book.

Her judgment was experienced and mature. She knew her world and its men and women. She was not too soon shocked, not too severe in her verdicts, not the victim of too many illusions. And yet, though everything about her witnessed to a serene temperament and the continual appeasing of mild desires, she dreamed sadly, like the girls in the archway, of an existence brilliant and tender, where dalliance and high endeavour, virtue and the flavour of sin, eternal appetite and eternal satisfaction, were incredibly united. Even now, on her fortieth birthday, she still believed in the possibility of a conscious state of positive and continued happiness, and regretted that she should have missed it.

She is a romantic, then, a relation of Emma Bovary ; but a relation many times removed, for she is essentially passive ; and even in her most intense dreams of happiness with Arthur Tremlow commonsense never deserts her :

For John [her husband] she had little compassion, and the gay and feverish existence of New York spread out invitingly before her in a vision full of piquant contrasts with the death-in-life of the Five Towns ! But her beloved girls ! They were an insuperable barrier. She could not leave them ; she could not forfeit the right to look them in the eyes without embarrassment. . . . And then the next moment—somehow—she did not know how—the difficulty of the girls was arranged. And she had departed. She had left the Five Towns for ever. And she was in the train, in the hotel, on the steamer ; she saw every detail of the escape. Oh ! The rapture ! The tremors ! The long sigh ! The surrender ! The intense living ! Surely no price could be too great. . . .

No ! Common sense, the acquirement of forty years, super-

vened, and informed her wild heart, with all the cold arrogance of sagacity, that these imaginings were vain. . . .

The passage, incidentally, introduces us to one of Bennett's besetting sins of style, one he fell into more and more as he grew older, the indiscriminate use of exclamation marks to serve as a sort of shorthand for accurate descriptions of emotional states.

The core of the novel, which relates it to *The Old Wives Tale* and *The Clayhanger Family*, to what was to be henceforth his abiding preoccupation, the slow, relentless passage of time wearing down and imperceptibly changing human beings just as by attrition even the most temperate climate shapes and re-shapes landscapes, is contained in the following passage :

And as Millicent sang the ballad Leonora was beguiled, by her singing, into a mood of overpowering melancholy. It seemed tragic that that fresh and pure voice, that innocent vanity, and that untested self-confidence should change and fade as maturity succeeded adolescence and decay succeeded maturity ; it seemed intolerable that the ineffable charm of the girl's youth must be slowly filched away by the thefts of time. " I was like that once ! And Jack too ! " she thought, as she gazed absently at the pair in front of the piano. And it appeared incredible to her that she was the mother of that tall womanly creature, that the little morsel of a child which she had borne one night had become a daughter of Eve, with a magic to mesmerise errant glances and desires. She had a glimpse of the significance of Nature's eternal iterance.

The trouble is, neither the plot nor the other characters, Uncle Mesach Myatt excepted, are worthy of Leonora. Tremlow, the Five Towns man from New York, scarcely comes alive, and the plot is worked out perfunctorily. The success of Leonora's daughter Milly on the London musical comedy stage is never convincing. Indeed, what the novel

lacks is the very quality of saturation and documentation which James found in *The Old Wives' Tale* and *The Clayhanger Family*. There is a complete absence of pressure behind the writing and when Leonora is off the stage the novel has little more significance than a novelette.

Uncle Mesach, however, demands a word to himself, for he too anticipates the later Bennett. He is a "character," perhaps even a "card," which is to say an eccentric. It has been pointed out often enough that English novelists tend always to confuse characters with "characters," to seize upon the odd and the idiosyncratic in their personages instead of dealing as the French do, in Flaubert's words with "the more general and therefore more typical." Uncle Mesach represents a transition in Bennett from the practice of the French to the English tradition. Much of the strength of his characterisation of Anna and Leonora springs just from this fact that he sees them as general and therefore typical women. Similarly, Anna's father Ephraim Tellwright as a miser might have been presented as an eccentric ; instead, he is the classic miser, no more invested with oddity than Balzac's Grandet. But Uncle Mesach is seen rather differently, not indeed with the loving recognition of oddity and delight in eccentricity that one finds in Dickens and Wells and later in Bennett himself in such a character as Mr. Critchlow in *The Old Wives' Tale*, but certainly with a much greater emphasis on idiosyncrasy than would have been possible before.

## CHAPTER III

### THE OLD WIVES' TALE

WITH the exception of *Anna of the Five Towns*, which was written in the comparative freedom that the state of being unknown confers upon a writer, and of *Imperial Palace*, which in intention at any rate was the realisation of a lifetime's ambition, *The Old Wives' Tale* is the most carefully, seriously and lovingly pondered of Bennett's novels. From the beginning it was to be a masterpiece ; the models for it might change, but they remained what Bennett considered the best. It happens that we have pretty complete details of what Henry James used to call " the merest grain, the speck of truth " in which the novel had its birth. On November 18, 1903, Bennett, living in Paris, recorded the following entry in his journal:

Last night, when I went into the Duval for dinner, a middle-aged woman, inordinately stout and with pendant cheeks, had taken the seat opposite my prescriptive seat. I hesitated, as there were plenty of empty places, but my waitress requested me to take my usual chair. I did so, and immediately thought: " With *that* thing opposite to me my dinner will be spoilt! " But the woman was evidently also cross at my filling up her table, and she went away, picking up all her belongings, to another part of the restaurant, breathing hard. Then she abandoned her second choice for a third one. My waitress was scornful and angry at this desertion, but laughing also. Soon all the waitresses were privately laughing at the goings-on of the fat woman, who was being served by the most beautiful waitress I have ever seen in any Duval. The fat woman was

certainly a crotchet, a " maniaque," a woman who lived much alone. Her cloak (she displayed on taking it off a simply awful light puce flannel dress) and her parcels were continually the object of her attention and she was always arguing with her waitress. And the whole restaurant secretly made a butt of her. She was repulsive ; no one could like or sympathise with her. But I thought—she has been young and slim once. And I immediately thought of a long 10 or 15 thousand words short story, " The History of Two Old Women." I gave this woman a sister, fat as herself. And the first chapter would be in the restaurant (both sisters), something like to-night—and written *radier* cruelly. Then I would go back to the infancy of these two, and sketch it all. One should have lived ordinarily, married prosaically, and become a widow. The other should have become a whore and all that; " guilty splendour." Both are overtaken by fat. And they live together again in old age, a nuisance to themselves and to others. Neither has any imagination. For " tone " I thought of " Ivan Ilytch," and for technical arrangement I thought of that and also of " Histoire d'une fille de ferme." The two lines would have to interweave. I saw the whole work quite clearly, and hope to do it.

This first account of its genesis differs in some detail from the later version published as a preface to the cheap edition of the novel. From that it would appear that Bennett wrote it in deliberate emulation of Maupassant's *Une Vie*. " 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, instead of only one." In fact, the only obvious influence of *Une Vie* on *The Old Wives Tale* is in the relationship between Constance and her son Cyril; **and** one suspects that what drew Bennett to Maupassant's

novel was simply its title. For at the time of die encounter with the old woman *in* the restaurant Bennett, we know, was already preoccupied with the theme of age, with die fact that young girls grow old. He had recently written *Leonora*, and it may well be that the real germ of *The Old Wives<sup>9</sup> Tale* lies in a remark made to him by Marcel Schwob apropos of the earlier novel seven weeks before the encounter in the restaurant : " You have got hold of the greatest of all themes, the agony of the older generation in watching the rise of the younger." The contrast between the fussy old woman with her parcels and puce dress and the beautiful waitress vitalised the theme that obsessed him into a compulsive image.

M. Lafourcade has suggested that in his choice of the setting of *The Old Wives' Tale*—the draper's shop at Bursley—Bennett was influenced by Balzac's *Maison du Chat qui Pelote*. It is certainly more likely than not that Bennett knew this novel, and M. Lafourcade is able to find many parallels between it and *The Old Wives<sup>9</sup> Tale*. Like John Baines, the " Maitre Drapier Guillaume " has two daughters, one of whom marries the virtuous shop assistant, the other the handsome faithless rake. And as M. Lafourcade points out, the general conception of *The Old Wives<sup>9</sup> Tale* was not necessarily connected either with the Five Towns nor a draper's shop. On the other hand, we know from the initial entry *in* the diary that one of the two old women was to be " a whore and all that; ' guilty splendour,' " and what better setting for this character, especially since Bennett was writing in Paris and much preoccupied by Parisian *sans-gene*, than Paris itself? And if the setting for the one sister was Paris, what more effective contrast could be found **for her than that** of her sister in Bursley ? For by the time

he came to write *The Old Wives' Tale* Bennett was fully alive to the richness of material that the Five Towns presented ; by then the Five Towns had become, as it were, his especial literary property, so much so that it would have been surprising if he had set, at that date, a major work elsewhere. As for the draper's shop, he writes in the preface to the cheap edition, " In the seventies, in the first decade of my life, I had lived in the actual draper's shop of the Baineses, and knew it only as a child could know it." It is customary for novelists to return for their backgrounds and material to the familiar scenes of their childhood. It is possible that M. Lafourcade may be right ; perhaps *The Old Wives' Tale* owes much in design and setting to Balzac. All one can say is that if *La Maison du Chat qui Pelote* had never been written there is no good reason to think that *The Old Wives Tale* would have been different from what it is.

Whatever the literary influences that may have helped to shape it, *The Old Wives' Tale* is quite unlike any other English novel. It is not, it may be admitted, among the greatest novels. As Mr. Forster has written :

Time is the real hero of *The Old Wives' Tale*. He is installed as the lord of creation—excepting indeed of Mr. Critchlow, whose bizarre exemption only gives added force. Sophia and Constance are the children of Time from the instant we see them romping with their mother's dresses; they are doomed to decay with a completeness that is very rare in literature. They are girls, Sophia runs away and marries, the mother dies, Constance marries, her husband dies, Sophia's husband dies, Sophia dies, Constance dies, their old rheumatic dog lumbers up to see whether anything remains in the saucer. Our daily life in time is exactly this business of getting old which clogs the arteries of Sophia and Constance, and the story that is a story and sounded so healthy and stood no nonsense cannot sincerely lead to any conclusion but the grave. Of course we

grow old. But a great book must rest on something more than an "of course," and *The Old Wives' Tale* is strong, sincere, sad, it misses greatness.

It misses greatness if one believes there is that in man which transcends time. Then it must appear as a partial picture true only for "our daily life in time." But at the level of "our daily life in time" *The Old Wives' Tale*, it seems to me, is in all essentials unassailable.

Certainly the passage of time has never been handled more skilfully or with greater brilliance in any novel. Bennett's thesis, that young girls grow into fat old women, may be of limited truth, but it is worked out with the fullest intensity; continuously throughout the novel the contrast between youth and age—and youth and age are always relative—is illustrated in a series of instances that only ends with the end of the book.

They sat opposite to each other, on either side of the fire—the monumental matron whose black bodice heavily overhung the table, whose large-rounded face was creased and wrinkled by what seemed years of joy and disillusion; and the young, slim girl, so fresh, so virginal, so ignorant, with all the pathos of an unsuspecting victim about to be sacrificed to the Minotaur of Time!

Thus Sophia and Mrs. Baines in the early years of the novel; and at the end:

Lily was quiedy asleep there, breathing with the softness of a child. Lily would have deemed that she was a very mature woman, who had seen life and much of it. Yet to Constance her face and attitude had the exquisite quality of a child. She was not precisely a pretty child, but her features, the candid expression of her disposition, produced an impression that was akin to that of beauty. Her abandonment was complete. She had gone through the night unscathed, and was now renewing herself in calm, oblivious sleep. Her ingenuous

girlishness was apparent then. It seemed as if all her wise and sweet behaviour of the evening could have been nothing but so many imitative gestures. It seemed impossible that a being so young and fresh could have really experienced the mood of which her gestures had been the expression. Her strong virginal simplicity made Constance vaguely sad for her.

The theme and the contrast belong to the oldest material of lyric poetry ; nothing could be further from the lyrical than Bennett's expression, and yet it seems to me that the final effect of *The Old Wives' Tale* is poetic.

But the girls Constance and Sophia grow into womanhood and old age in relation not only to a succession of characters older and younger than themselves but to the history of Bursley. The background is no more static than the characters ; the flux of time governs all, and the passage of time is marked just as much by the change, for instance, from horse trams to steam trams and thence to electric trams as by the deaths of John Baines, Samuel Povey, Constance and Sophia. *The Old Wives' Tale* is essentially the history of a community as well as of two old women.

Bennett describes the paralysis of John Baines as " a tragedy in ten thousand acts." The use of the word tragedy is journalistic, but as Bennett employs it the phrase equally well describes *The Old Wives' Tale* itself. And never have the ten thousand acts which make a lifetime of daily life been more cunningly disposed. Reading *The Old Wives' Tale*, we think we have isolated, in Mr. Forster's admirable phrase, " wriggling and interminable, the naked worm of time " ; but this is an illusion. Or we may think, as in Miss Sitwell's " Colonel Fantock," that " time passed, suavely, imperceptibly " ; and this too is error. In fact, time in *The Old Wives' Tale* lingers lovingly for pages at a

time on a single day and then, when it wants to, leaps whole years. The novel opens in the autumn of 1863 with Sophia's daring extraction of Mr. Povey's tooth, Constance and Sophia being then respectively sixteen and fifteen years old ; it ends in the summer of 1907 with the death of Constance at sixty. The first book ends in June 1866, with Sophia's elopement with Gerald Scales; in other words, a quarter of the whole novel is expended on the first three years of the action. The second book, dealing with the life of Constance, and the third, dealing with that of Sophia, are of almost equal lengths, each being approximately a quarter of the whole ; but the second covers the years between June 1866 and August 1893, while the third extends only from June 1866 to the end of 1878. Thus, twelve years of Sophia's life in Paris are narrated in as much space as is taken to describe Constance's twenty-seven years of marriage and widowhood in Bursley, but this means that Sophia's last fourteen years in Paris are not detailed at all.

The adjective that seems most usually applied to Bennett's attitude to his subject-matter in *The Old Wives' Tale* is "objective." The word is only partly just. It is true for what may be called the great set passages of the novel, Samuel Povey's discovery that his admired cousin Daniel had murdered his wife, the public execution outside Paris, the confrontation of Sophia with the dead body of Gerald Scales, and Constance's reflections on the death of her sister. In such instances the material demands objectivity. Elsewhere, it breaks down wholly or partly. It breaks down wholly in Bennett's overt comment on the death of Samuel Povey:

A casual death, scarce noticed in the reaction after the great febrile demonstration of . . . Besides, Samuel Povey never could

impose himself on the burgesses. He lacked individuality. He was little. I have often laughed at Samuel Povey. But I liked and respected him. He was a very honest man. I have always been glad to think that, at the end of his life, destiny took hold of him and displayed, to the observant, the vein of greatness which runs through every soul without exception. He embraced a cause, lost it, and died of it.

Nowhere else in *The Old Wives' Tale* does Bennett speak in his own voice. It comes as a profound and jarring shock, and one wonders why Bennett let it pass.

Nevertheless, it is revealing. For, apart from the objectivity in the great set passages, elsewhere the tone is one of what one must call, for want of a better term, facetious irony somewhat akin to the mock heroic. It is—and this is significant—conspicuously not evident in the chapters dealing with Sophia's life in Paris. Instances of this facetious irony could be quoted without end. It exists sometimes in the use of a single unexpected adjective ; it is more often a tone pervading a whole passage or scene. Sometimes it is blatant:

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

Generally it is more subtle :

Mr. Povey imbibed eagerly of the potion, put the cup on the mantelpiece, and then tilted his head to the right so as to

submerge the affected tooth. In this posture he remained, awaiting the sweet influence of the remedy. The girls, out of a nice modesty, turned away, for Mr. Povey must not swallow the medicine, and they preferred to leave him unhampered in the solution of a delicate problem. . . .

One could instance the account of the dead elephant at Bursley Wakes.

Now it is true that from the beginning Bennett had a tendency towards facetiousness. But he had certainly repressed it on *Anna of the Five Towns* and the serious novels earlier than *The Old Wives' Tale*. Why, then, does it crop up in and almost dominate *The Old Wives' Tale*? There are, I think, several factors involved, but certainly pointers towards the reason may be found in the strange outburst into the first person singular on the death of Samuel Povey and in the absence of facetious irony in the Paris chapters.

Part of the reason lies, I think, in the nature of his material. *Ah, que la vie est quotidienne!* sighed Laforgue. For Bennett that life is quotidian was almost its especial virtue. All the same, it was one thing to celebrate birth and death and change, the seasons of life, quite another to deal in the same book with drapers' assistants suffering from toothache and potters and colliers gaping at the spectacle of a dead elephant. On the one hand, there was the theme of the novel, which had high dignity, on the other the characters through which and the background against which the theme must be worked out, and these were unsophisticated and unfashionable in the extreme. It is hardly possible to treat toothache and circus elephants with the seriousness demanded by death and mutability. So, in a way, the tone of facetious irony implies that Bennett is apologising, or at least pleading that

allowance must be made, for his characters and background ; he *is*, as *it* were, exhibiting them to his sophisticated readers and saying, " Yes, I know they're absurd, provincial both in time and in place ; but——" The " but " comes in with the great set passages, with the heroism and the loyalty of Samuel Povey and Constance. When the scene shifts to Paris he need be facetious no more : Paris is literary, it is proper to write of Paris.

And then, too, Paris was strange. Certainly by the time he wrote *The Old Wives' Tale* he had lived there for eight years ; but the twenty most formative years of his life he had lived in the Potteries, some of them in the very draper's shop about which he was writing. The Baineses, the Poveys, Mr. Critchlow, Maggie, must have been as familiar to him as his childhood for they were in fact part of his childhood. It must be remembered that he had spent a much longer period of time in the preparation of *The Old Wives' Tale* than for any of his other novels ; it could have meant nothing else but a re-living of his childhood, and it is impossible to re-live one's childhood, confront the ghosts of the people who were about one as a child, without acute emotion. The emotion may be—it was with Samuel Butler and James Joyce—hatred. With Bennett it was plainly warm affection, even love, though it might be tinged with exasperation. It comes out without disguise in his outburst on Samuel Povey. For the rest, he could mask it under the semblance of objectivity which was facetious irony. The facetious irony, in other words, was a method of self-protection.

For in *The Old Wives' Tale* Bennett is no longer in any real sense a follower of the French naturalists. He has retained their sense of form ; but that is all. He has become

an *English* humorist even though he *is* more disciplined than the English humorists tend to be. His affinities are at once obvious and unexpected : dwelt upon a little more and allowed to break the restraints that Bennett imposes upon him, Mr. Critchlow would become a Dickens type. Similarly, Mr. Povey, *in* the toothache episode especially, might be a character in early Wells. What is remarkable—and it is the index of Bennett's artistic integrity—is just the restraint with which he holds such glorious traditionally English characters, characters in the double sense, in check ; they might so easily have spilled over and swamped the book.

For one's final impression of *The Old Wives'* Tale is of richness in order. While reading, one is vividly aware all the time of brilliance of character-creation and brilliance of invention ; of Mr. and Mrs. Baines, Constance and Sophia, Mr. Critchlow and Miss Insull, Mr. Povey and Daniel Povey, Gerald Scales, Dick Povey and Lily Holl, Maggie and the succession of Constance's servants, the admirable Mr. Till Boldero ; and of a succession of masterly episodes, the extraction of Mr. Povey's tooth, the beautiful comedy of Mr. Povey's proposal, the children's party, Cyril Povey's criminal career as a schoolboy smoker, the murder of Daniel Povey's wife and Samuel's heroism at the trial, the courtship of Sophia and Scales, the scenes in Paris, the public execution, Sophia's return to Bursley, the scene in Manchester where she confronts Scales's dead body. It is the creation of a whole world and a whole epoch. But in retrospect one realises that the brilliance of character and invention has been sternly subordinated to Bennett's overriding conception. The beauties of the novel, in the eighteenth-century sense, are many, but none of them is detachable. One is left feeling

that never has the rhythm of ordinary normal life, life in time, been transcribed so faithfully, *so sure*),". *In the broad scope of his novel* as in *the* development of his characters—Ww right it is that the *impulsive, romantic Sophia* should become, once in Paris, provincial of the provincial, "detracting," essentially of the Five Towns—Bennett never goes wrong.

One is aware, however, of a dissonance between the Paris chapters and the rest of the novel. In themselves, the Paris chapters are a *tour deforce*, only marred by Bennett's clumsy transliteration of French in the dialogue—such things as : " 'But yes, madame, till to-morrow. Then madame has want of nothing ? ' " It is simply that they are not, as it were, sufficiently woven into the texture of the whole. We know that the idea of describing the siege of Paris was an afterthought, and perhaps it was not wholly a fortunate afterthought, since, for all Bennett's tact in dealing with them, both the siege and the description of the execution occupy the centre of interest which should be held by Sophia. The beauty of the rest of the book lies in the balance between characters and background; the relation between them is organic and harmonious. But Bennett's attitude to Paris is not the same as his attitude to Bursley. The one he could take for granted, the other he could not. He is much more outside his material when writing of Paris. James, as we have seen, found Bennett's conspicuous quality to be his saturation in his material. One feels this all the time in the three-quarters of the novel in which Bursley is the setting ; one does not feel it of the quarter of the book devoted to Paris. Instead, one is conscious of being in the presence of a tremendous *feat*. Within those chapters all is right; **but** they are not right in relation to the novel as a whole. There

is a break in the unity and to that extent, then, the plan of the novel is at fault.

For all that, *The Old Wives' Tale* is a triumph of the over-riding *conception* ; a triumph, too, of style. That Bennett was not in any abstract sense a stylist, that his prose is rarely graceful, often vulgar and frequently clumsy, is beside the point. It is possible that for a certain kind of writer style may be legitimately an end in itself. For the novelist it is never so. For the novelist style is the medium between his subject-matter and his attitude towards it ; it comprehends both and can be divorced from neither. It is at once a unifying agent and the condition in which the book has its existence. It is Bennett's achievement in *The Old Wives' Tale* that his style can range without discordance and incongruity from the farcical, the trivial and the grotesque to the most gravely serious, from the recordings of a shop assistant's toothache and the adventures of souvenir-hunters round the corpse of a circus elephant to the considered reflections of an old woman in the presence of death :

. . . The body, whose outlines were clear under the sheet, was very small, thin, shrunk, pitiable as the face. And on the face was a general expression of final fatigue, of tragic and acute exhaustion ; such as made Sophia pleased that the fatigue and exhaustion had been assuaged in rest, while all the time she kept thinking to herself horribly : " Oh ! how tired he must have been ! "

Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion, uncoloured by any moral or religious quality. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life, nor that he was a shame to his years and to her. The manner of his life was of no importance. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. Youth and vigour always came to that. Everything came to that. He

had ill-treated her; he had abandoned her; he had been a devious rascal; but how trivial were such accusations against him ! The whole of her huge and bitter grievance against him fell to pieces and crumbled. She saw him young, and proud, and strong, as for instance when he had kissed her lying on the bed in that London hotel—she forgot the name—in 1866 ; and now he was old, and worn, and horrible and dead. It was the riddle of life that was puzzling and killing her. By the corner of her eye, reflected in the mirror of a wardrobe near the bed, she glimpsed a tall, forlorn woman, who had once been young and was now old. He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. " Yet a little while," she thought, " and I shall be lying on a bed like that ! And what shall I have lived for ? What is die meaning of it ? " The riddle of life itself was killing her, and she seemed to drown in a sea of inexpressible sorrow.

## CHAPTER IV

### CLAYHANGER AND OTHER FIVE TOWNS BOOKS

THIS day is the most important of my life," Mrs. Bennett reports her husband as having said on the publication of *The Old Wives Tale*: "I shall never be able to do better," He was right; but all the same the novels that make up *The Clayhanger Family* are memorable, our literature would be the poorer for their absence, and only Bennett—and Bennett at his best—could have written them. Within nine months of the publication of the greater book he had conceived *Clayhanger*, the first of the three Clayhanger novels, and had begun the necessary research. It appeared in 1910; *Hilda Lessways* a year later; *These Twain* not until 1916. In the intervals between the three, Bennett wrote more than a dozen other books, but obviously the Clayhanger novels must be considered together.

But first a word of warning is necessary. The Clayhanger novels have been published in one volume under the general title of *The Clayhanger Family*. This may be convenient; but it is also calculated to lead the unwary reader astray. Simply because the three novels appear between one set of boards it is a great temptation to read them as successive parts of one novel and to seek—necessarily in vain—for a unity that was never intended. *The Clayhanger Family* is not in any strict sense a trilogy. Rather, it is a triptych, of which the first panel, *Clayhanger*, deals with the **adolescence**

and young manhood of Edwin Clayhanger; the second panel, *Hilda Lessways*, with the girlhood and young womanhood of Hilda Lessways; and the third panel, *These Twain*, with their married life together. And the three panels must be analysed and judged separately.

When this is realised, comparison with *The Old Wives' Tale* is impossible. Bennett was attempting something different, of a lower order of artistic creation perhaps, and on a smaller scale, but to be criticised on its own terms. In *Clayhanger* he is much nearer to his subject both in time and in his position relative to it. Edwin Clayhanger is not Bennett's exact contemporary but he is only eleven years older; and while *Clayhanger* is in no sense an autobiographical novel still Bennett does come near identifying himself with Edwin, who represents a perfectly conceivable development of the young Bennett. Some critics have seen in *Clayhanger* the influence of *The Way of All Flesh* on Bennett. Certainly he admired Butler's novel, but the parallel between the two books cannot be taken far; Bennett himself was demonstrably no Ernest Pontifex, nor was his father a Theodore. All the same, *The Way of All Flesh* is a possible pointer to the making of *Clayhanger*. As in Butler's the major theme of Bennett's novel is repressive parental authority. We know that Bennett himself as a young man in his father's law practice, asked his father for a rise in salary and, when it was not forthcoming, left and went to London. Edwin Clayhanger, too, working in his father's printing works and, like Bennett, dreaming of being an artist, asks his father for a rise—and, when it is refused with some contempt, stays where he is. One can see that the germ of the novel may well have been in that incident of Bennett's own life. What would have happened to him if

circumstances had compelled him to knuckle under to his father ?

Like Richard Larch before him, Edwin Clayhanger is an aspect of Bennett, a possible Bennett. He is Bennett as he conceivably might have been ; he is without Bennett's talent and ambition ; he has his sensitiveness and shyness without the aggressive assertion that compensated for them ; he has his almost anal-erotic mania for tidiness ; he has his humanitarian, Liberal sympathies, his generosity of mind ; he is, unlike Bennett, not in the least a " Card." And all in all, he is among the most attractive heroes of twentieth-century fiction. Bennett, who believed passionately in the " interestingness " of ordinary things and ordinary people, was never more successful in revealing the " interestingness " of an apparently perfectly ordinary man than in *Clayhanger*.

D. H. Lawrence, who was temperamentally as far removed from him as it is possible for two human beings to be, who could have had no single idea in common with him, and who yet seems to have accorded him always a grudging respect, once criticised Bennett, or rather the characters typical of Bennett, for their acceptance of, their acquiescence in, the frustrations of existence. As Mr. Pritchett has shown in his brilliant essay in *The Living Novel*, this acceptance of frustration on the part of his characters is precisely Bennett's strength. " Frustration," says Mr. Pritchett, " is one of the normal conditions of life, and calming is the novelist who does not kick against the pricks."

Neither Bennett nor his characters ever kick against the pricks. This does not mean that Edwin Clayhanger is a passive character ; he is not at all one of the " dumb oxen " Mr. Wyndham Lewis has found in Hemingway's novels, to whom things merely happen. Rather one sees him—and

this is true of all Bennett's successful characters—as a natural growth, shaped by innumerable pressures of circumstance into his own individuality as a tree is shaped to its own unique form by wind, rain and the hazards of climate. So there is apparently a complete absence of contrivance on the part of the author in *Clayhanger*; Bennett follows, one would say, the grain of life.

There is, too, a complete absence of the *parti pris* such as disfigures *The Way of All Flesh*. This is most marked where it was perhaps most to be expected, in the relationship between Edwin and his father. As Mr. Pritchett had admirably said :

Edwin never understands his father because he does not know his father's past. The father cannot understand the son because the father's whole attitude to life is that his rise from barbarous poverty is a primitive miracle. He is primitive, the son is rational. Each one bumps awkwardly along in the wonder of his own nature. When the father is stricken by fatal illness the son becomes the tyrant. Their emotions about each other are strong ; but the two men do not feel these emotions for each other at the same time.

The result is a poignancy and a truth which are far closer to general human nature than the special case that Butler describes. Bennett's excellence lies in the delineation of the general human situation.

And *Clayhanger* continually surprises; or rather, Edwin himself is continually surprised, and the reader with him. For while reading *Clayhanger*, we are living at the growing point of Edwin's mind. He lives as it were by a series of continual small revelations, discoveries about life, human nature and human relationships, which may be ordinary enough in themselves, part of universal experience, **but** which Edwin responds to with such open-mindedness as to

make them absolutely fresh. One may quote, out of a hundred instances, the description of the smoking concert that Edwin attends on the evening of the day after leaving school, in particular the account of the clog dance :

She danced ; and the service doorway showed a vista of open-mouthed scullions. There was no sound in die room, save the concertina and the champion clogs. Every eye was fixed on those clogs; even the little eyes of Mr. Peake quitted the button of his waistcoat and burned like diamond points on those clogs. Florence herself chiefly gazed on those clogs, but occasionally her nonchalant petulant gaze would wander up and down her bare arms and across her bosom. At intervals, with her ringed fingers she would lift the short skirt—a nothing, an imperceptibility, half an inch, with glance downcast; and the effect was profound, recondite, inexplicable. Her style was not that of a male clog-dancer, but it was indubitably clog-dancing, full of marvels to the connoisseur, and to the profane naught but a highly complicated series of wooden noises. Florence's face began to perspire. Then the concertina ceased playing—so that an undistracted attention might be given to the supremely difficult final figures of the dance.

And thus was rendered back to the people in the charming form of beauty that which the instinct of the artist had takep. from the sordid ugliness of the people. The clog, the very emblem of the servitude and the squalor of brutalised populations, was changed, on the light feet of this favourite, into the medium of grace. Few of these men but at some time of their lives had worn the clog, had clattered in it through winter's slush, and through the freezing darkness before dawn, to the manufactory and the mill and the mine, whence after a day of labour under discipline more than military, they had clattered back to their little candle-lighted homes. One of the slatterns behind the doorway actually stood in clogs to watch the dance. The clog meant everything that was harsh, foul, and desolating ; it summoned images of misery and disgust. Yet on those feet that had never worn it seriously, it became the magic instrument of pleasure, waking dulled wits and forgotten aspirations, putting upon everybody an enchantment. . . . And then,

suddenly, the dancer threw up one foot as high as her head and brought two clogs together like a double mallet on the board, and stood still. It was over.

Now the description and the comment are the author's ; there is no attempt such as one would find in the work of the generation of novelists that came after him, to see the clog-dance through Edwin's eyes or to transmit it to the reader along his nerves. But it is Edwin's reaction to it that gives the dance its significance :

Edwin was staggered. The blood swept into his face, like a hot tide. He was ravished, but he was also staggered. He did not know what to think of Florence, the champion female clog-dancer. He felt that she was wondrous; he felt that he could have gazed at her all night; but he felt that she had put him under the necessity of reconsidering some of his fundamental opinions. . . . And he reflected, dazzled by the unforeseen chances of existence : " Yesterday I was at school—and to-day I see this ! "

It is this inarticulate awareness of Edwin's of " the interestingness of things," this capacity of his to be continually surprised into ever-widening mental and emotional horizons, which gives him his vividness, his life, and the pathos that always attends him. He *is* provincial, he *is* inhibited, he *is* frustrated by his father in his natural aspirations ; and yet one feels that within these limitations of circumstance he is free. He is not there to illustrate a thesis; he is a complete creation. And it is this that finally invalidates James's criticism of *Clayhanger* (apart from the fact that James was implicitly condemning all novels that were not of the kind he wrote himself):

This most monumental of Mr. Arnold Bennett's recitals, taking with it its supplement " Hilda Lcssways," already before us, is so describable (as a catalogue) through its being a monu-

ment exactly not to an idea, a pursued and captured meaning, or in short *to* anything whatever, but just simply of the quarried and gathered material it happens to contain, the stones and bricks and rubble and cement and promiscuous constituents of every sort that have been heaped in it and thanks to which it quite massively piles itself up. . . . A huge and in its way a varied aggregation, without traceable lines, divivable direction, effect of composition, the mere number of its pieces, the great dump of its material, together with the fact that here and there in the miscellany, as with the value of bits of marble or porphyry, fine elements shine out, it keeps us standing and waiting to the end—and largely just because it keeps us wondering.

In fact, the narration of events exists always in relation to Edwin Clayhanger. It may be that many of the incidents in the history of the Five Towns that Bennett describes are interesting in their own right, but they are all organic to the development of the novel and of Clayhanger himself. Thus, the chapter "The Oldest Sunday School Teacher," which most movingly describes the sudden appearance of Mr. Shushions, senile and forgotten, at the Sunday School centenary celebrations, is not in the book because of its own intrinsic interest but because it links Edwin with his former meeting with the old man years before, and therefore with his father, and is instrumental in revealing another facet of the mysterious personality of Hilda Lessways. Similarly the superb early chapter "The Child-Man," on the boyhood of Darius Clayhanger, is not there as a sort of brilliant gloss on the works of the Hammonds or *Das Kapital*; Bennett is not showing off his knowledge of nineteenth-century social history; it is organic to the book, the root of Darius's and Edwin's complete failure to understand each other. Bennett, in other words, is not simply a documentary writer, as James and much later opinion often suggest, even though when the creative impulse flags, in his last years, he is sometimes

not much more. It is rather that in him the primary creative impulse was inextricably bound up with the contemplation of the actual in its most quotidian sense.

It is true that *Clayhanger* suffers, as all chronicle novels must, from a lack of form, from the lack of an overriding conception. Looking back on *The Old Wives' Tale*, one remembers first of all not the characters, not Sophia and Constance, but time itself, the inexorable movement of time. Looking back on *Clayhanger*, one remembers, as when one looks back on one's own life, certain high spots, so that in retrospect one's impression of the novel is of a series of " beauties " in Dr. Johnson's meaning of the word ; of Shushions, of Big James, of the glee-party and the Sunday school centenary, of the struggle between Edwin and Darius, of Edwin's triumph and Darius's death, of Aunt Hamp, in particular, I think, of the relationship between Edwin and Hilda Lessways. This last is a beautifully accurate representation of the birth of love ; there appears little reason to pass on the credit for it, as M. Lafourcade does, to Stendhal and his *De Vamour*. As she appears in *Clayhanger* Hilda Lessways is a most subtle and satisfying delineation of the eternal feminine ; and the trite expression is used advisedly, for it will be remembered that what we know of her we know only through her conversation and through Edwin's eyes ; we share his bewilderment in the presence of a mysterious and irrational attraction. We are, to use Jung's concept, in the presence of Edwin's *anima*, the male unconscious, which finds its mirror-image in the mysterious person of the loved woman—mysterious because it reflects the unconscious and has been singled out, from so many thousands of possible partners, by it.

The concept throws light on Bennett's comparative failure

in *Hilda Lessways* and *These Twain*. It is an attribute of the *anima* that by definition it can never be known ; which is perhaps merely another way of saying that love is blind. No man can explain either to himself or to anyone else why he chose the one particular woman as the object of his love. The measure of identity between Bennett and Edwin Clayhanger, the creator and the created, on the one hand and the success of Hilda in *Clayhanger* on the other indicate, it seems to me, that Hilda was a representation of Bennett's own *anima*. If this is so, then *Hilda Lessways* is an attempt rationally to account for something by its very nature irrational. The novel covers much the same period and many of the same events as *Clayhanger*, but from Hilda's point of view. Her life is documented in detail ; everything is explained, her vacillations in *Clayhanger*, her impulsive flights, her unpredictable comings and goings. Everything is explained to the satisfaction of the intellect. But that, unfortunately, matters least of all. She is a construction, not a creation ; her former stature is diminished, the mystery has gone. One does not, in fact, reconcile her with *Clayhanger's* Hilda ; and one is convinced neither by her marriage to George Cannon nor by Cannon himself. It is as though Bennett, in order to satisfy his sense of order and tidiness, his belief in the rational which the creation of the incalculable Hilda of *Clayhanger* has outraged, has had to manufacture the machinery of a whole further novel by which to account for his heroine. *Hilda Lessways*, one feels, was a profound mistake. Reading it, one has a curious impression of a reversal of the usual process of creation ; as though an artist, having caught intuitively a perfect likeness, had then gone on to work out from the miracle itself the rough sketches, the tentative drafts, the notebook scribbings which

would normally have preceded it. Hilda—the Hilda of *Clayhanger*, whom one thinks of as the real Hilda—comes to life in *Hilda Lessways* only in a few isolated passages; when faced with the realisation that her marriage is bigamous, that the child she is expecting is illegitimate, and that the boarding house is bankrupt:

Hilda in a curious way grew proud of him (George Cannon). With an extraordinary inconsequence she dwelt upon the fact that, was grand—even as a caterer, he had caused to be printed at the foot of the menu forms which he had instituted the words : " A second helping of all or any of the dishes will willingly be served if so desired." And in the general havoc of the shock she began to be proud also of herself because it was the mysterious power of her individuality that had originated her disaster. . . .

and when, in the company of Edwin, she passes the theatre in which the strikers are holding a meeting :

" I'd no idea there was a theatre in Bursley," she remarked, driven into banality by the press of her sensations.

" They used to call it the Blood Tub," he replied. " Melodrama and murder and gore, you know."

She exclaimed in horror. " Why are people like that in the Five Towns ? "

" It is our form of poetry, I suppose," said he. She started sensitively. It seemed to her that she had never understood the secret inner spirit of the Five Towns and that by a single phrase he had made her understand it. " Our form of poetry ? " Who but he could have said a thing at once so illuminating and so simple.

Apparently perplexed by the obvious effect on her of his remark he said : " But you belong to the Five Towns, don't you ? "

She answered quietly that she did. But her heart was saying, " I do now. You have initiated me. I never felt the Five Towns before. You have made me feel them."

Imperfect though it is, *These Twain*, the story of the married life of Edwin and Hilda, is a much better novel than *Hilda Lessways*. "There are only two fundamental differences in the world—the difference between sex and sex, and the difference between youth and age." If the latter difference is the main theme of *Clayhanger* the former is the only theme of *These Twain*. Just as in the earlier novel understanding between Edwin and his father is impossible, so in the later is understanding between Edwin and his wife impossible. Inevitably, then, their marriage—and it is extremely faithfully documented—becomes a prolonged exercise in guerilla warfare, warfare over houses, over the conduct of Edwin's printing business, over domestic servants, over houses again, over Edwin's reluctance to take part in local politics, and so on. Hilda's position in all this is clear: "It is each for himself in marriage after all, and I have got my own way." And Edwin's? Throughout the friction, the irritation, the exasperated anger is the realisation: "What a romance she has made of my life!" and at the end (but it is obviously no end, it will be forgotten and rediscovered again and again as long as life of the marriage lasts):

And then there flashed in his mind, complete, the great discovery of all his career. It was banal; it was commonplace; it was what everyone knew. Yet it was the great discovery of all his career. If Hilda had not been unjust in the assertion of her own individuality, there could be no merit in yielding to her. To yield to a just claim was not meritorious, though to withstand it would be wicked. He was objecting to injustice as a child objects to rain on a holiday. Injustice was a tremendous actuality! It had to be faced and accepted. . . . To reconcile oneself to injustice was the master achievement. He had read it; he had been aware of it; but he had never really felt it till that moment on the dark canal-bridge. He was awed, thrilled by the realisation. He longed ardently to put it to the test.

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What could have made Edwin's and Hilda's marriage credible despite the constant friction, the tantrums of Hilda's neurotic caprices, is of course physical passion. But the suggestion of physical passion is precisely what Bennett cannot give us, and the substitute for it, "What a romance she has made of my life!" is completely inadequate.

Nevertheless, despite its serious central flaw *These Twain* is a rich book. In it Bennett exploited his *vein* of ironical comedy to an extent he was never to achieve again. And the comedy is rich and warm. One remembers the brilliant scene at the beginning of the book in which Edwin's *stepson* and young Bert Benbow are overheard by Edwin and Inqpen demonstrating their faith in the efficacy of prayer by praying for a penknife. One remembers Bennett's treatment of the Benbows, almost the Platonic Idea of a provincial, lower middle-class nonconformist family, intriguing, righteous, padded in the fat of their own self-approbation; in them is delineated a whole English way of life:

Bert, glowering, gloomy and yet proud, and above all self-conscious, grew even more self-conscious at this statement. Spectacles had been ordained for him by the oculist, and his parents had had the hardihood to offer him his first pair for a birthday present.

They had so insisted on the beauty and originality of the scheme that Bert himself had almost come to believe that to get a pair of spectacles for a birthday present was a great thing in a boy's life. He was now wearing the spectacles for the first time. On the whole, gloom outbalanced pride in his demeanour, and Bert's mysterious soul, which had flabbergasted his father for about a week, peeped out sidelong occasionally through those spectacles in bitter criticism of the institution of parents. He ate industriously. Soon Auntie Hamps, leaning over, rapped half-a-sovereign down on his sticky plate. Everybody pretended to be overwhelmed, though nobody entided

to prophesy had expected less. Almost simultaneously with the ring of the gold on the plate, Clara said :

" Now what do you say ? "

But Albert was judiciously benevolent:

" Leave him alone, mother—he'll say it all right."

" I'm sure he will," his mother agreed.

And Bert said it, blushing, and fingering the coin nervously. And "Luntie Hamps sat like an antique goddess, bland, superb, morally immense. And even her dirty and broken fingernails detracted naught from her grandiosity. She might feed servants on dripping, but when the proper moment came she could fling half-sovereigns about with anybody.

One remembers Auntie Hamps, and Bennett's description of her is exact. She *is* " bland, superb, morally immense " ; she is grandiose. Garrulous, mean, sanctimonious, a moral bully, Auntie Hamps is one of the greatest achievements of the comic spirit in English fiction, as magnificently triumphant on her death-bed (\* " Who's that putting coal on the fire ? " said a faint but sharply protesting voice from the bed') as in life. And the whole novel is lit up by the humanity, the fairness, the honesty and generosity of mind of Edwin Clayhanger.

Bennett's other Five Towns books need not detain us long. *Helen with the High Hand* is a light-hearted comedy, an " idyllic diversion" in Bennett's own words, though how he saw it as an idyll one does not understand. A facetious study of the way in which a young girl forces her wealthy and curmudgeonly uncle to assume his place in the higher ranks of Five Towns society, it is a cheerful and vulgar production. *The Price of Love*, published in 1914, is a much more serious and ambitious work, related in tone to the Clayhanger books. It contains some excellent characterisation, Mrs. Maldon, Mrs. Tarns, the faithful char, and old Councillor Batchgrew, one of the best of Bennett's large

gallery of miserly old nonconformist rogues. But it suffers from the imposition upon the characters of a mechanical, melodramatic plot and is quite without the humanity or the humour of the Clayhanger books.

More important than either of these novels is *The Card*, published immediately after *Clayhanger*. It is much the best of Bennett's light novels. A picaresque novel, it recounts the adventures of Denry Machin from the time when he wins his scholarship to the secondary school by altering his examination marks to the time when he becomes the youngest mayor of Bursley. Denry is a near-rogue, but a consistently amusing one. He succeeds by bounce, and the novel succeeds by bounce also. The original of the novel seems to have been the late H. K. Hales, the author of *The Autobiography of a Card*, but that Bennett saw in Denry an aspect of himself can scarcely be doubted. "Edward Henry Machin first saw the smoke on the 27th May, 1867," and so did his creator. It is probably not at all an accident that *The Card* and *Clayhanger* were written at much the same time, for while Denry and Edwin have little in common they are both *personae* of Bennett. To see Bennett exclusively as a "card" as some critics have done is to take a small and comparatively unimportant part of the man for the whole; but that in his public life Bennett did, like Denry, deliberately capitalise his personal idiosyncrasies, his stammer and his quiff of hair, and seek deliberately to surprise, to cut a figure, by the adaptation of a studied manner and a studied way of life, we have the authority of personal friends like Wells and Swinnerton. And the enduring quality of *The Card*, as of *Clayhanger*, probably derives from its being in a very real sense a projection of one side of his own character.

There remain 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*. For the most part based on anecdote, the contents of these books range from the farcical to the grimly pathetic. Bennett was not a natural short-story writer ; his method of writing, the steady accretion of tiny details, demanded a bigger canvas than the short story could give him ; and most of his stories are further vitiated by the fact, more obvious than in his novels, that he is as it were exposing the Five Towns for the edification of a cosmopolitan audience, explaining, commenting, illustrating. His two most famous stories, *The Matador of the Five Towns* and *The Death of Simon Fuge*, seem to me to have been much overrated. In each case, the point of the story is the impact made by the Five Towns upon the narrator, an intellectual from London. They are over-written, over-declamatory and, for all Loring's ecstatic response to the Five Towns :

I enjoyed all this. All this seemed to me to be fine, seemed to throw off the true, fine, romantic savour of life. I would have altered nothing in it. Mean, harsh, ugly, squalid, crude, barbaric—yes, but what an intoxicating sense in it of the organised vitality of a vast community unconscious of itself!

they are little more than conducted tours of the public institutions of the Potteries overweighted by Bennett's naive belief in the " interestingness of things."

## CHAPTER V

### THE LAST NOVELS

'~J~'**HESE** *TWAIN* was the last of Bennett's Five Towns *I* novels, and the fiction, he wrote after that novel until the appearance of *Riceyman Steps* in 1923 is for the most part dreary in the extreme. The best of it is *Mr. Prohack*, one of his most successful light novels, but for the rest one's impression is of tiredness, of his creative power at its lowest ebb. *The Roll Call*, describing the life of young George Cannon, Hilda Lessway's son, in London, is at least an attempt at a serious study, but apart from the characterisation of Mr. Haim and the final chapters on George's experience as an amateur soldier, it is a perfunctory work. The best-known of the novels of this period, *The Pretty Lady*, on the life of a French prostitute in the West End, is nothing else but a triumphant exercise in vulgarity ; it is Bennett at his least attractive and most flashy : Lord Beaverbrook so admired it that on its strength he recruited Bennett into the Ministry of Information. It is difficult to imagine how the author of *The Pretty Lady* was ever capable of writing *Riceyman Steps*.

*Riceyman Steps* is a remarkable novel, and the more one considers it the more remarkable it appears to be. It is as much outside the tradition of English fiction as *The Old Wives Tale* and *Clayhanger* are at its centre. Certainly it has nothing of the universality of those books ; its strength and its weakness both lie in the fact that it is a study of a special case, one might almost say a clinical study of a pathological case. It was a new departure **for** Bennett, and of a

kind he did not again attempt. In the past he had needed space ; he had described the life of a whole town over whole generations; his canvases were packed with figures and he had been lavish in creation of characters. *Riceyman Steps* represents a terrific contraction and a terrific concentration ; instead of a whole town merely a square in Clerkenwell ; instead of a whole generation not much more than a year ; instead of a packed canvas only a handful of characters, not more than three of which are of real importance. In part it is a return to Bennett's earliest masters, but it is not a return to his early method ; there is no resemblance to *Anna of the Five Towns*. In its concentration, its distillation of all the possibilities of a single theme, though not at all in its technique, it is one with Ford Madox Ford's conception of the novel as written by himself and Conrad : " The rendering of an affair ; of one embroilment, one human coil, one psychological progression." At the same time, *Riceyman Steps* is quintessentially Bennett. A novelist's stock of characters, of situations, of themes, is small; much smaller than the ordinary reader probably ever realises. Much of the strength of *Riceyman Steps* comes from the fact it is a crystallisation of Bennett's abiding preoccupations, preoccupations with certain kinds of characters and situations evident in his work from its earliest days but here brought into the compass of a single novel. Admittedly the most important is missing from *Riceyman Steps*, the sense of the passage of time, of life as a drama played out in ten thousand acts. That was inevitable from the very nature of **the** novel; but how much that is scattered through his previous work, touched upon, repeated, harked back to, is here organised into a whole. *Riceyman Steps* is the **study** of Henry **Earlforward, a miser; and misers had always**

fascinated Bennett; one remembers Tellwright in *Anna of the Five Towns*. Earlforward, moreover, is a second-hand bookseller, and the mere physical appearance of books, books as objects of aesthetic value in themselves, were a constant source of excitement to Bennett, as they had been to Richard Larch in his first novel and to Edwin Clayhanger. Then, Earlforward falls in love, for the first time in his life, in middle age with a middle-aged woman, Mrs. Arb; and one remembers that Bennett's interest in the loves of the middle-aged found its first expression in *Leonora*, as early as 1903. The third character in *Riceyman Steps* is Elsie the faithful servant; the loyalty and self-abnegation, in exchange for the most miserable wages, of working-class women had always moved Bennett; in the cellar of every house described in the Five Towns novels there is always a slavey whose cheerful, unimaginative acceptance of the most intolerable conditions is a source of surprise to no one but her creator; and even in what one may call his luxury novels, such as *The Pretty Lady*, *The Strange Vanguard*, *Accident* and *Imperial Palace*, there is always the sense, sometimes expressed in terms that suggest guilt on the part of the author, that the comfort and materialistic splendour are only possible on the basis of a vast exploitation of the poor, who, surprisingly in Bennett's view, seem never to see anything strange, much less intrinsically wrong, in their condition. In *Riceyman Steps* a representative of this submerged class becomes a principal character for the first time.

Then there is the more fundamental preoccupation, related to the preoccupation with the passage of time, with physical decay, illness and death. In Bennett's novels characters are ill and die with a thoroughness unique in English fiction. One remembers the long illness of Mr. Baines, in

*The Old Wives' Tale*, the death of Darius in *Clayhanger* and of Auntie Hamps in *These Twain*. By the time of *Riceyman Steps* the preoccupation has become an obsession ; a quarter of the novel is devoted to Earlforward's illness and dying, and there is also the illness and death of his wife. Death, we may agree with Geoffrey West, fascinated and frightened Bennett. " He was never so impressive as when he wrote of it ; his characters attained in their dying a dignity above their living. In *The Old Wives' Tale*, and even in *Clayhanger*, he could dominate death by the spiritual power that was in him. Compassion rose above despair to bestow nobility. But as the spirit died in him, death became a mortal terror, no more and no less. In *Riceyman Steps*, and again in *Lord Raingo*, he no longer triumphs but is triumphed over. One feels here a fundamental morbidity ; no more is death the natural sleep that rounds our life, but an obscene enemy whose lineaments must be told over and over, each creaking footstep of its approach recorded." Thus Mr. West. The passage smacks, it seems to me, of something like self-righteousness, of a too-easy condemnation. For *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger* on the one hand, and *Riceyman Steps* and *Raingo* on the other are not comparable ; in the first pair of books Bennett is concerned with the passage of time, which includes both birth and death, the cycle of fruition and decay ; in the second pair he is concerned with a single life, in Earlforward's case devoted to the acquisition of money, in Raingo's to the acquisition of material power, and shows the futility of such pursuits in the face of physical decay and death. When Mr. West adds that Bennett was " defeated " by death one can only wonder what other end there could have been for him *in the absence of a religious belief that would have transcended the fact of*

death. It is not given to all agnostics to be happy pagans, and one would have thought that so calmly to have contemplated, without the consolations of religion, the degradation of the body in death after long illness might have counted for courage in Bennett.

Bennett himself realised that the novel owed its popularity on publication to the character of Elsie. Moving though she is, the great achievement of the book is certainly Earlforward. In the creation of his hero Bennett must have known exactly the task he was setting himself. The miser is one of the classic figures of fiction, and it is the measure of Bennett's success that he creates a new kind of miser. He is in the grand tradition: his questions on the disposal of the dirt to the men who are vacuum-cleaning the shop, "Do you sell it? Do you get anything for it?" electrify; they have the same quality of obsession as certain lines of dramatic poetry, for instance, Sir Epicure Mammon's "I will have all my beds blown up, not stuf: Down is too hard." What is unique in him is the nature of his miserliness. Balzac tells us that Grandet was "the most important man in the arrondissement" and that "in a financial point of view . . . he had something of the tiger and of the boa-constrictor in his nature." Miser as he is, Grandet is interested in power, the power that comes from possessions, from property and investments; his tentacles grope out in all directions. Not so with Earlforward. Earlforward is the pure miser, as we speak of the pure scientist or the pure artist. His passion is disinterested. He is obsessed with money not that it may breed more money but simply for its own sake. He does not speculate, he is not concerned with investments. In a way, his miserliness is negative; thus, when Dr. Raste invites him to contribute to a hospital

charity, rather than give money he offers an early and rare edition of Gray's Poems :

He saw to what an extent he was making a fool of himself—losing pounds in order to save a ten-shilling note ! Ridiculous ! Idiotic ! Mad ! True, he had bought the book for ten shillings, and he strove to regard the transaction from the angle of his own disbursement. But he could not deny that he was losing pounds. Yes, pounds and pounds. Still, he could not have let the ten-shilling note go. A ten-shilling note was a treasure, whereas a book was only a book. Illogical, but instinct was more powerful than logic.

He does not seek so much to make money, as Grandet does, as not to let go the money he possesses. His mania is to conserve rather than to get, for he is indolent, deficient in energy, characterised by an extraordinary soft obstinacy." He is in a way curiously innocent and childlike ; indeed, whether Bennett was acquainted with Freud's work or not, one can scarcely forbear seeing in Earlforward the child lovingly hoarding and playing with its fasces. In fiction, at any rate, Bennett's is a new conception of the miser.

Earlforward might have been a monster ; he starved his wife, his servant and himself. But he is not ; and he is not because of two qualities, his innocence and the irony in which the whole novel is bathed. It is these qualities which make the love and marriage between Earlforward and Mrs. Arb at once credible and tender. They are both seen more or less as children, as " innocents." And their relation, in which Mrs. Arb—one never thinks of her as Mrs. Earlforward—joyously starves herself for her husband's sake (" ' My husband is a miser. I've encouraged him for the sake of peace. And so now you know, doctor ! ' "), is counterbalanced by that between Elsie and Joe. Theirs is overtly a relation between " innocents," a mother-child

relation between the magnificently simple servant girl and war-shattered psychotic Joe. Yet it seems to me certain that Bennett intended it as a parallel relation to the Earlforwards'. This is made even more marked by the fact that both Elsie and Mrs. Arb are widows who have known happy marriages before. If the parallel was, as I believe, intended, then it follows that Bennett saw Earlforward essentially as a defective, as a " case." *Riceyman Steps* has usually been taken as an exercise in realism of the most intransigent order. The realism cannot be denied, but it is conditioned not only by Bennett's irony, which acts as an intermediary between the reader and the full horror of the story, but by a subtle distortion which the reader may not be conscious of but which surely acts upon him and prepares him to accept the unpalatable and the monstrous. It finds expression, first of all, in the names of the characters : Earlforward, Arb, Raste, Daphutt, Belrose, names by no means outrageous in the Dickensian way, but for all that out of the straight, as it were ; none of them is recorded in the London telephone directory. And something like distortion, certainly the abandonment of realism as Bennett's first masters understood it, occurs again at the very end of the book ; in the picture of the Belroses and their shop, which is almost pure Dickens, and the sudden apparition of the Rev. Augustus Earlforward, who is a figure from farce. In his miser Bennett created a character which in the fullest sense of the word is a  
 (" <sup>1</sup> humour " :

When some one peculiar quality  
 Doth so possess a man that it doth draw  
 All his affects, his spirits and his power  
 In their confluxions all to run one way ;  
 This may be truly said to be a humour.

The English writers who have created character in terms of "humours," Jonson, Smollett and Dickens, have been men of exuberant and grotesque imagination. Bennett was not; but not all the careful surface realism, the loving descriptions of illness and disease, can hide the grotesqueness that underlies *Riceyman Steps* or the devices of classical comedy that he was impelled to use. They were forced upon him by the very nature of his material.

One would not, I suppose, normally describe *Riceyman Steps* as comedy, but it is the underlying pattern of comedy, with its necessary simplification of character—both Mrs. Arb and Elsie for all their robustness are "humours" like Earl-forward—which makes the novel so remarkable and gives it so much the air of a *tour de force*.

It was the last of Bennett's great achievements. *Lord Raingo*, which followed it three years later, has the fascination of a *roman à clef*, but not much more. It was the result of Bennett's experiences as a Very Important Person in the 1914–1918 war; the inside information, about No. 10 Downing Street and the way in which cabinet meetings are held, being given him by Lord Beaverbrook. In some respects Raingo himself, the self-made millionaire who becomes the equivalent of Minister of Information, is a latter-day Denry Machin, and the book has its moments of successful comedy, as when he pleads his weak heart in order to obtain a peerage. Much the best character of the novel is the Prime Minister, Andy Clyth. The relationship between Raingo and his mistress Delphine is no more convincing than that portrayed in *The Pretty Lady*.

The novels that followed, *The Strange Vanguard* and *Accident*, represent, as they belong to, Bennett's world of luxury yachts and *wagons-lits*. They were conceived as

commercial articles and are now unreadable. *Imperial Palace*, melancholy though it is, demands closer attention if only because it represents the fulfilment of one of Bennett's ambitions. "Do you know what the great thing of the future is?" George Cannon asked Hilda Lessways. "I mean the really great thing—the smashing big thing? Hotels. There'll be more money and more fun to be got out of hotels soon than out of any other enterprise in the world." It was Bennett himself speaking, though in fact he never seems to have decided whether it was the great hotel or the great store that was for him the most effective symbol of twentieth-century capitalist civilisation. He tackled both in his early fantasias. Indeed, the first fantasia he wrote, in 1902, was *The Grand Babylon Hotel*; while the hero of *Hugo*, published in 1906, is the owner of the greatest department store in the world and the action takes place in it. It was nothing like corruption set up by enormous material success that led him to write *Imperial Palace*; it is all implicit in *The Grand Babylon Hotel*. Bennett possessed always an enormous interest in great and complicated organisations for their own sake, particularly those organisations which must of necessity function behind the scenes hidden from public view, which depend for their existence on presenting a smooth facade to the world. Thus, in a comparatively early entry in the **journal** he describes with evident fascination the scene-changing during an opera at Covent Garden. He is similarly fascinated during his first Atlantic crossing by the engine-room of the liner he travelled upon. He has been derided **for** this absorption in the mechanics of modern industrial civilisation; foolishly, because at bottom it was no more **or less than a** just appreciation of the complexity of **effort, the combination** of so many diverse skills and energies, **that** goes

to the making of practically every typical modern product. Unlike nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of every thousand, he never took the product for granted. He had a genuine vision of the inter-relatedness, the inter-dependence, of all who live in the modern industrial world. He gloried in it, because it seemed to him a triumph of human endeavour; and at the same time he did not forget the frustrations, the impoverishment of life, that it almost necessarily means for millions.

This imaginative awareness, this almost aesthetic appreciation, of division of labour and the organic relationship between its parts, is one of the most attractive characteristics of Edwin Clayhanger. It is not too much to say that he is haunted by it. Because of this, in *The Clayhanger Family* what one may call the documentary element is always in perspective, part of the material upon which Edwin's imagination plays, and subdued by it. Elsewhere in Bennett it is not always so. In the over-admired story *The Matador of the Five Towns* the description of the newspaper office, for instance, sticks out like a naked rock of documentary material simply because we are never aware of the narrator of the story as a character; he is no more than the eye of a camera. Similarly with *Imperial Palace*, the fundamental criticism of which is not that Bennett chose to write about a great luxury hotel but that he created no character in the novel who could contain the hotel in his imagination and so triumph over it. The gallery of characters is enormous, but they all of them exist not *in* their own right but merely as attributes of the hotel. As long as Bennett remains in the hotel, is content to describe its organisation, he is brilliant and convincing at the documentary level. When he moves his characters out of the hotel or attempts to describe their

instinctual lives, their emotional relations one with another, he falls immediately and disastrously into the banality of novelettish romanticism. Inevitably; for the book is so designed that the characters can have no existence apart from their service to the hotel; the first dinner between Orcham, Sir Henry Savott and Gracie takes place simply in order that Orcham may invite his guests to inspect the kitchens and so give Bennett an opportunity of describing the bowels of Imperial Palace. One is reminded of the clumsiest kind of radio feature programme. So that when Bennett really gets down to the emotional relationship between Orcham and Gracie it is too late; the hotel has conquered; as it was bound to, because the emotional relationship, the story proper, was if not an after-thought on the author's part certainly a secondary consideration.

As a novel, then, Imperial Palace was doomed from the very beginning—not because of its subject; one can imagine what Zola would have made of it had hotels appealed to him as trains and banks and mines did—and there is far more life in any one chapter of the early thrillers *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and *Hugo* than there is in all its 630 pages.

During the years since his death, and indeed for some years before it, Bennett's reputation as a novelist has been in eclipse. One reason for this is doubtless the usual reaction that sets in after his death against an author who has dominated his age. Then there is the fact that so much of his work, especially during the last fifteen years of his life, was meretricious, so that he appeared at times a wholly commercial writer, the spokesman of the Philistines, a view reinforced by his unfortunate and dogmatic pronouncements of life and letters in his weekly articles in the *Evening Standard*, such pronouncements as: " The first duty of a poet is, not

to write poetry . . . but to provide for his old age." Even more important, the novelists of the generation that followed his, the advanced novelists of their day as he had been in his, were writing fiction of a kind utterly different from his and wholly opposed to it, and for them he represented the enemy even more than did Wells and Galsworthy simply because they saw him as so much more essentially a novelist than the other two. As early as 1924 Virginia Woolf was writing, in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* :

With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner. There she sits in the corner of the carriage—that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown changes only the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out—there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers has so much as looked at her. They have looked, very powerfully, searchingly and sympathetically out of the window ; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage ; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature.

But Mrs. Woolf and Joyce and Lawrence with whom she associated herself in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, are now themselves dead (on the evidence of *Aspects of the Novel* and his Rede Lecture on Mrs. Woolf, E. M. Forster, does not seem ever to have shared her view of Bennett), and have been succeeded by a younger generation of novelists writing in reaction against them. So that Bennett may now be seen in perspective, he is a novelist of an earlier generation, he belongs to literary history, one need take sides no longer. One may even say, without committing oneself to heresy, that if Mrs. Brown stands for life, for human nature, he

looked at her quite as searchingly, as sympathetically, in Constance Baines as Mrs. Woolf did in Mrs. Dalloway. . . .

For time has already separated the living from the dead matter in his work. *Anna of the Five Towns*, *The Old Wives\* Tale*, *Clayhanger*, *These Twain* and, in a somewhat different class, *Riceyman Steps* remain. They are not in any absolute sense great novels: "strong, sad, sincere" are Mr. Forster's adjectives, and we may agree that more is necessary for great novels. But within their limits how solid and satisfying they are. One cannot say that Bennett created a world in the sense that we speak of the Dickens' world or Balzac's world. His world is the ordinary world, at a given time and in a given place; and those limitations go far to explain his virtues. He was, as we have seen, an extreme extravert, and for that he paid the penalty, as any extreme psychological type must. But it enabled him to identify himself to a greater degree than almost any English novelist before him with the ordinary life about him in his formative years; so much so that the very frustrations that beset human beings in ordinary life are seen as having value in themselves and are recorded with a kind of loving appreciation. He was, it has been said, "a connoisseur of the normal," and because of this he re-created normal existence with a scrupulous fidelity which has never been surpassed and with an honesty and humanity which convince us entirely of the justice of his presentation. It is a presentation neither exalted nor ignoble; it is the truth to common life as the appeal to common experience shows it to be; and like any record of truth it is moving and even beautiful.



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