

## STORIES FROM THE FIVE TOWNS

Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, Longshaw, Turnhill – these are the Five Towns of Arnold Bennett’s stories, set in the English Midlands in the early 1900s. Today the Five Towns are the city of Stoke-on-Trent, but the place is still famous for its pottery . . . and for the people in Arnold Bennett’s stories.

They are not famous or important people. They work in shops and factories; they fall in, and out of, love; they argue and they quarrel. Sometimes they are clever and successful, and sometimes they do very stupid things. Philip has some important news to tell his mother, but he is also going to get a big surprise . . . Sir Jee hates his portrait, but what can he do about it? It was a present from the people of the Five Towns . . . At Knype station, Toby Hall suddenly decides to take the train to Turnhill, but why? Then there are John and Robert. They are brothers, they live in the same house, they eat meals together – and neither has said a single word to the other for ten years . . .





OXFORD BOOKWORMS LIBRARY

*Human Interest*

---

## Stories from the Five Towns

Stage 2 (700 headwords)

Series Editor: Jennifer Bassett

Founder Editor: Tricia Hedge

Activities Editors: Jennifer Bassett and Alison Baxter



ARNOLD BENNETT

---

# Stories from the Five Towns

*Retold by*  
Nick Bullard



OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford ox2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

OXFORD and OXFORD ENGLISH are registered trade marks of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

This simplified edition © Oxford University Press 2008

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published in Oxford Bookworms 1996

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

**No unauthorized photocopying**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the ELT Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Any websites referred to in this publication are in the public domain and  
their addresses are provided by Oxford University Press for information only.  
Oxford University Press disclaims any responsibility for the content

ISBN 978 0 19 479072 7

A complete recording of this Bookworms edition of  
*Stories from the Five Towns* is available on audio CD ISBN 978 0 19 478995 0

Printed in Hong Kong

*Illustrated by:* Martin Hargreaves

Word count (main text): 5540 words

For more information on the Oxford Bookworms Library,  
visit [www.oup.com/bookworms](http://www.oup.com/bookworms)

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	i
News of the Engagement	1
The Burglary	7
Beginning the New Year	15
The Silent Brothers	23
GLOSSARY	39
ACTIVITIES: Before Reading	43
ACTIVITIES: While Reading	44
ACTIVITIES: After Reading	46
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	52
ABOUT THE BOOKWORMS LIBRARY	53





## NEWS OF THE ENGAGEMENT

My mother never came to meet me at Bursley station when I arrived in the Five Towns from London. She always had other things to do; she was getting ready for me. So I always walked alone up Trafalgar Road, between the factories and past the football field. And so tonight, I had time to



*I always walked alone up Trafalgar Road.*

think. I had some very important news for my mother, and I didn't know how to tell her.

I wrote to my mother every week, to tell her what I was doing. She knew the names of all my friends. I often wrote about Agnes and her family. But it's difficult to write in a letter: 'I think Agnes likes me,' 'I'm in love with her,' 'I'm sure she likes me,' 'I think she loves me,' 'I'm going to ask her to marry me.' You can't do that. Well, I couldn't do it. And on the 20th December I asked Agnes to marry me, and Agnes said yes. But my mother didn't know anything about it. And now, on the 22nd December, I was coming to spend Christmas with my mother.

My mother was a widow. I was her only son – and now I was engaged and she didn't know. I was afraid she was going to be a little unhappy, and I was ready for a difficult evening.

I walked up to the front door, but before I put my hand up to ring, the door opened and there was my mother. She put her arms around me.

'Well, Philip! How are you?'

And I said, 'Oh! I'm all right, mother. How are you?'

She smiled at me. She looked excited and younger than her forty-five years. There was something strange in her smile. I thought: 'She *knows* I'm going to get married. How does she know?'

But I said nothing. You have to be careful with mothers.

‘I’ll tell her at supper,’ I decided.

I went upstairs to my bedroom. When I came down, my mother was busy in the kitchen. I went into the dining-room, and here I had a surprise. There were three chairs around the table, and three plates and three glasses.

So Agnes *was* coming! I didn’t know how my mother knew, but she did know. She and my wonderful Agnes were planning a surprise for me. Agnes was coming to Bursley for Christmas!

There was a ring at the door. ‘It’s Agnes!’ I thought, and running to the door, I opened it.

It was Mr Nixon.

Mr Nixon was an old friend of the family. He was a large, strong man of about forty-nine or fifty. He was very helpful to my mother after my father’s death.

‘Good evening, young man,’ he said. ‘It’s good to see you back in Bursley.’

‘Mr Nixon has come for supper, Philip,’ said my mother.

Mr Nixon often came to supper during my visits to Bursley, but never on the first night. I liked him, but I wasn’t very happy to see him tonight because I wanted to talk to my mother. I couldn’t talk to her about Agnes with Mr Nixon sitting at the table.

We started our supper. We talked about this and that, but nobody ate very much. I was thinking about what to say to my mother when Mr Nixon went home. At the end

of the meal I told my mother that I must go to the post office. I had an important letter to post.

‘Can’t it wait until tomorrow, my pet?’ my mother asked.

‘It can’t,’ I said.

My letter, of course, was to Agnes. A letter to Agnes could not wait until tomorrow! I walked over to the dining-room door.

‘A letter to a lady?’ asked Mr Nixon, laughing.

‘Yes,’ I replied.

I walked to the post office and posted my letter. When I got back home, I was sorry to see that Mr Nixon was still there. He was alone in the sitting-room, smoking.

‘Where’s mother?’ I asked.

‘She’s just gone out of the room,’ he said. ‘Come and sit down. Have a cigarette. I’d like to talk to you, Philip.’

I took a cigarette and sat down. I hoped the talk was not going to be a long one.

‘Well, my boy,’ he said. ‘Would you like me as a stepfather?’

For a second I could not move or speak.

‘What?’ I said. ‘You mean . . . you and my mother . . .?’

‘Yes, my boy, I do. I asked her yesterday, and she said yes. I’ve wanted to ask her for a long time – I think she knew that. Did she tell you in her letters? No? It’s difficult to write in a letter, of course. She couldn’t really write,

*News of the Engagement*

---

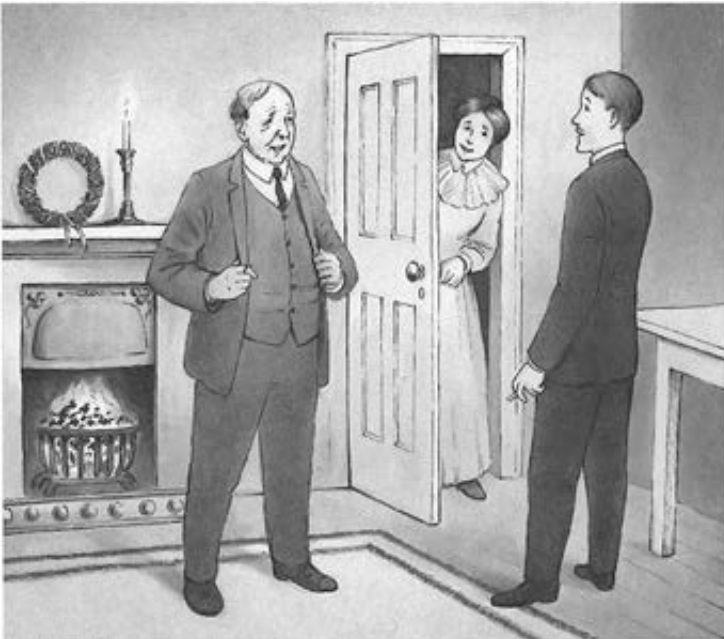
“My dear Philip, an old friend, Mr Nixon, is falling in love with me and I think I’m falling in love with him. I think he’ll ask me to marry him soon.” I don’t think your mother could write that, could she?’

I laughed.

‘Shake hands,’ I said. ‘This is wonderful news.’

After a moment my mother came in, a little red in the face.

‘The boy’s very happy, Sarah,’ said Mr Nixon.



*After a moment my mother came in.*

*Stories from the Five Towns*

---

I said nothing about my own plans that evening. It was something new to me that my mother could fall in love, and that a man could fall in love with her. It was something new to me that she was lonely in our old house and that perhaps she wanted a new life. Perhaps, like all sons, I thought only about myself and my life. So I decided to say nothing about my news, and that evening my mother came first for me. I could tell her about Agnes tomorrow. We live and learn.

## THE BURGLARY

Lady Dain said: ‘Jee, if that portrait stays there much longer, I shall go mad. I can’t eat any more with it up there!’ She looked up at the big portrait on the wall opposite the breakfast table.

Sir Jehoshaphat said nothing.

Lady Dain did not like the portrait. Nobody in the Five Towns liked the portrait. But the portrait was by Cressage, the finest portrait painter in England, and a portrait by Cressage cost a thousand pounds or more.



*‘I can’t eat any more with it up there!’*

Sir Jehoshaphat Dain was perhaps the cleverest and most successful businessman in the Five Towns. His business, called Dain Brothers, had one of the biggest pottery factories in England, and their cups and plates went all over the world. Sir Jehoshaphat was rich, because he sold his pottery very cheaply, and paid his workers very little. But Sir Jee liked to be important, so he used some of his money to pay for schools and hospitals for the people of the Five Towns.

The people of the Five Towns often laughed at Sir Jee, but they also wanted to say thank you for the schools and hospitals. They decided to give him a portrait for a present. So Cressage painted the portrait and many people in London thought it was very good. ‘A wonderfully clever portrait of a successful businessman from a small town; a little man who has made a lot of money and who thinks he is very important,’ said one newspaper.

It was not a kind portrait and many of the people of the Five Towns laughed when they saw it. But Sir Jehoshaphat had to take his present, and to say thank you for it. Now it was on his wall in his home, Sneyd Castle, and after sixteen months Lady Dain was tired of looking at it.

‘Don’t be stupid, wife,’ said Sir Jee. ‘I’m not taking that portrait down, or selling it – not even for ten thousand pounds. I want to keep it.’

But that wasn’t true. Sir Jee hated the portrait more than



## *The Burglary*

---

his wife did. And he was thinking of a secret plan to get rid of it.

‘Are you going into town this morning?’ asked his wife.

‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘I’m in court today.’

He was one of the town magistrates. While he travelled into town, he thought about his plan for the portrait. It was a wild and dangerous plan, but he thought it was just possible.



That morning, the police were very angry with Sir Jee. A man was in court, and the police said he was a burglar. They wanted him to go to prison for five years or more. But Sir Jee did not agree. He said there was no proof that William Smith was a burglar. The other magistrate was very surprised at this and the police were very cross, but William Smith left the court a free man. Before he left, Sir Jee asked to see him in his office.

‘Smith,’ said Sir Jee, looking at him carefully, ‘you were a lucky man this morning, you know.’

Smith was a small, thin man, with untidy hair and dirty clothes.

‘Yes, I was lucky,’ he answered. ‘And what do you want from me?’

‘I hope I can help you,’ said Sir Jee.

‘I don’t know if I want help, but I never say no to money.’

‘Sit down,’ said Sir Jee.

*Stories from the Five Towns*

---

William Smith sat down at Sir Jee's desk. 'Well?' he asked.

'I want you to steal something from my house. But it won't be a crime.'

'What?' Smith was very surprised.

'In my house, Sneyd Castle, there is a portrait of myself. I want someone to steal it.'

'Steal it?'

'Yes.'



*'I want you to steal something from my house.'*

‘How much will you pay me for doing it?’

‘Pay you?’ said Sir Jee. ‘It’s a Cressage! You’ll get two thousand pounds for it in America.’

And Sir Jee told Smith the story of the portrait and why he wanted to get rid of it. Smith thought for a minute and then said:

‘All right, I’ll do it, just to help you.’

‘When can you do it? Tonight?’

‘No,’ said Smith. ‘I’m busy tonight.’

‘Well, tomorrow night.’

‘I’m busy tomorrow, too.’

‘You’re a busy man,’ said Sir Jee.

‘Well, business is business, you know,’ said Smith. ‘I can do it the day after tomorrow.’

‘But that’s Christmas Eve.’

‘Well, it’s either that or Christmas Day. I’m busy again after that.’

‘Not in the Five Towns, I hope,’ said Sir Jee.

‘No. There’s nothing left in the Five Towns.’

So they agreed on Christmas Eve.

‘Now,’ said Sir Jee, ‘I’ll describe the rooms in Sneyd Castle to you. Then you’ll know where—’

William Smith looked at him and laughed loudly. ‘Describe the rooms to me? Do you think I’m stupid? I’m a businessman – I know Sneyd Castle better than you do.’



*Stories from the Five Towns*

---

On the afternoon of 24th December, when Sir Jehoshaphat came home to Sneyd Castle, his wife was packing suitcases. The Dains were going to their son's house for Christmas. Their son John had a new wife and a new baby, and he wanted to spend Christmas in his new home with all the family.



*'Oh, Jee!' she cried. 'You are difficult.'*