

A Great Man

by Arnold Bennett



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1

His Birth

On an evening in 1866 (exactly eight hundred years after the Battle of Hastings) Mr. Henry Knight, a draper's manager, aged forty, dark, clean-shaven, short, but not stout, sat in his sitting-room on the second-floor over the shop which he managed in Oxford Street, London. He was proud of that sitting-room, which represented the achievement of an ideal, and he had a right to be proud of it. The rich green wall-paper covered with peonies in full bloom (poisoning by arsenical wall-paper had not yet been invented, or Mr. Knight's peonies would certainly have had to flourish over a different hue) matched the magenta table-cloth of the table at which Mr. Knight was writing, and the magenta table-cloth matched the yellow roses which grew to more than exhibition size on the Axminster carpet; and the fine elaborate effect thus produced was in no way impaired, but rather enhanced and invigorated, by the mahogany bookcase full of imperishable printed matter, the

horsehair sofa netted in a system of antimacassars, the waxen flowers in their glassy domes on the marble mantelpiece, the Canterbury with its spiral columns, the rosewood harmonium, and the posse of chintz-protected chairs. Mr. Knight, who was a sincere and upright man, saw beauty in this apartment. It uplifted his soul, like soft music in the gloaming, or a woman's face.

Mr. Knight was writing in a large book. He paused in the act of composition, and, putting the pen between his teeth, glanced through the pages of the volume. They were filled with the drafts of letters which he had addressed during the previous seven years to the editors of various newspapers, including the *Times*, and several other organs great then but now extinct. In a space underneath each letter had been neatly gummed the printed copy, but here and there a letter lacked this certificate of success, for Mr. Knight did not always contrive to reach his public. The letters were signed with pseudonyms, such as A British Citizen, Fiat Justitia, Audi Alteram Partem, Indignant, Disgusted, One Who Knows, One Who Would Like to Know, Ratepayer, Taxpayer, Puzzled, and Pro Bono Publico—especially Pro Bono Publico. Two letters, to a trade periodical, were signed A Draper's Manager of Ten Years' Standing, and one, to the *Clerkenwell News*, bore his own real name.

The letter upon which he was now engaged was numbered seventy-five in the series, and made its appeal to the editor of the *Standard*. Having found inspiration, Mr. Knight proceeded, in a hand distinguished by many fine flourishes:

... It is true that last year we only paid off some four millions, but the year before we paid, I am thankful to say, more than nine

millions. Why, then, this outcry against the allocation of somewhat less than nine millions out of our vast national revenue towards the further extinction of the National Debt? It is not the duty of the State, as well as of the individual, to pay its debts? In order to support the argument with which I began this communication, perhaps you will permit me, sir, to briefly outline the history of the National Debt, our national shame. In 1688 the National Debt was little more than six hundred thousand pounds....

After briefly outlining the history of the National Debt, Mr. Knight began a new paragraph thus:

In the immortal words of Shakspeare, wh——

But at this point he was interrupted. A young and pleasant woman in a white apron pushed open the door.

‘Henry,’ she called from the doorway.

‘Well?’

‘You’d better go now.’

‘Very well, Annie; I’ll go instantly.’

He dropped the pen, reduced the gas to a speck of blue, and in half a minute was hurrying along Oxford Street. The hour was ten o’clock, and the month was July; the evening favoured romance. He turned into Bury Street, and knocked like fate at a front-door with a brass tablet on it, No. 8 of the street.

‘No, sir. He isn’t in at the moment, sir,’ said the maid who answered Mr. Knight’s imperious summons.

‘Not in!’ exclaimed Mr. Knight.

‘No, sir. He was called away half an hour ago or hardly, and may be out till very late.’

‘Called away!’ exclaimed Mr. Knight. He was astounded, shocked, pained. ‘But I warned him three months ago!’

‘Did you, sir? Is it anything very urgent, sir?’

‘It’s——’ Mr. Knight hesitated, blushing. The girl looked so young and innocent.

‘Because if it is, master left word that anyone was to go to Dr. Christopher’s, 22, Argyll Street.’

‘You will be sure to tell your master that I came,’ said Mr. Knight frigidly, departing.

At 22, Argyll Street he was informed that Dr. Christopher had likewise been called away, and had left a recommendation that urgent cases, if any, should apply to Dr. Quain Short, 15, Bury Street. His anger was naturally increased by the absence of this second doctor, but it was far more increased by the fact that Dr. Quain Short happened to live in Bury Street. At that moment the enigma of the universe was wrapped up for him in the question, Why should he have been compelled to walk all the way from Bury Street to Argyll Street merely in order to walk all the way back again? And he became a trinity consisting of Disgusted, Indignant, and One Who Would Like to Know, the middle term predominating. When he discovered that No. 15, Bury Street, was exactly opposite No. 8, Bury Street, his feelings were such as break bell-wires.

‘Dr. Quain Short is at the Alhambra Theatre this evening with the family,’ a middle-aged and formidable housekeeper announced in reply to Mr. Knight’s query. ‘In case of urgency he is to be fetched. His box is No. 3.’

‘The Alhambra Theatre! Where is that?’ gasped Mr. Knight.

It should be explained that he held the stage in abhorrence, and, further, that the Alhambra had then only been opened for a very brief period.

‘Two out, and the third at the theatre!’ Mr. Knight mused grimly, hastening through Seven Dials. ‘At the theatre, of all places!’

A letter to the *Times* about the medical profession was just shaping itself in his mind as he arrived at the Alhambra and saw that a piece entitled *King Carrot* filled the bill.

‘*King Karrot!*’ he muttered scornfully, emphasizing the dangerously explosive consonants in a manner which expressed with complete adequacy, not only his indignation against the entire medical profession, but his utter and profound contempt for the fatuities of the modern stage.

The politeness of the officials and the prompt appearance of Dr. Quain Short did something to mollify the draper’s manager of ten years’ standing, though he was not pleased when the doctor insisted on going first to his surgery for certain requisites. It was half-past eleven when he returned home; Dr. Quain Short was supposed to be hard behind.

‘How long you’ve been!’ said a voice on the second flight of stairs, ‘It’s all over. A boy. And dear Susan is doing splendidly. Mrs. Puddiphatt says she never saw such a——’

From the attic floor came the sound of a child crying shrilly and lustily:

‘Aunt Annie! Aunt Annie! Aunt *Annie!*’

‘Run up and quieten him!’ Mr. Knight commanded. ‘It’s like him to begin making a noise just now. I’ll take a look at Susan—and my

firstborn.'



2

Tom

In the attic a child of seven years was sitting up in a cot placed by the side of his dear Aunt Annie's bed. He had an extremely intelligent, inquisitorial, and agnostical face, and a fair, curled head of hair, which he scratched with one hand as Aunt Annie entered the room and held the candle on high in order to survey him.

'Well?' inquired Aunt Annie firmly.

'Well?' said Tom Knight, determined not to commit himself, and waiting wanly for a chance, like a duellist.

'What's all this noise for? I told you I specially wanted you to go to sleep at once to-night.'

'Yes,' said Tom, staring at the counterpane and picking imaginary bits off it. 'And you might have known I shouldn't go to sleep after *that!*'

'And here it's nearly midnight!' Aunt Annie proceeded. 'What do you want?'

‘You—you’ve left the comb in my hair,’ said Tom. He nearly cried. Every night Aunt Annie curled Tom’s hair.

‘Is it such a tiny boy that it couldn’t take it out itself?’ Aunt Annie said kindly, going to the cot and extracting the comb. ‘Now try to sleep.’ She kissed him.

‘And I’ve heard burglars,’ Tom continued, without moving.

‘Oh no, you’ve not,’ Aunt Annie pronounced sharply. ‘You can’t hear burglars every night, you know.’

‘I heard running about, and doors shutting and things.’

‘That was Uncle Henry and me. Will you promise to be a good boy if I tell you a secret?’

‘I shan’t *promise*,’ Tom replied. ‘But if it’s a good secret I’ll try—hard.’

‘Well, you’ve got a cousin, a little boy, ever so little! There! What do you think of that?’

‘I knew someone had got into the house!’ was Tom’s dispassionate remark. ‘What’s his name?’

‘He hasn’t any name yet, but he will have soon.’

‘Did he come up the stairs?’ Tom asked.

Aunt Annie laughed. ‘No,’ she said.

‘Then, he must have come through the window or down the chimney; and he wouldn’t come down the chimney ‘cause of the soot. So he came through the window. Whose little boy is he? Yours?’

‘No. Aunt Susan’s.’

‘I suppose she knows he’s come?’

‘Oh yes. She knows. And she’s very glad. Now go to sleep. And I’ll tell Aunt Susan you’ll be a good boy.’

‘You’d better not,’ Tom warned her. ‘I don’t feel sure. And I say, auntie, will there come any more little boys to-night?’

‘I don’t think so, dear.’ Aunt Annie smiled. She was half way through the door, and spoke into the passage.

‘But are you sure?’ Tom persisted.

‘Yes, I’m sure. Go to sleep.’

‘Doesn’t Aunt Susan want another one?’

‘No, she doesn’t. Go to sleep, I say.’

‘Cause, when I came, another little boy came just afterwards, and he died, that little boy did. And mamma, too. Father told me.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Aunt Annie, closing the door. ‘Bee-by.’

‘I didn’t promise,’ Tom murmured to his conscience. ‘But it’s a good secret,’ he added brazenly. He climbed over the edge of the cot, and let himself down gently till his feet touched the floor. He found his clothes, which Aunt Annie invariably placed on a chair in a certain changeless order, and he put some of them on, somehow. Then he softly opened the door and crept down the stairs to the second-floor. He was an adventurous and incalculable child, and he desired to see the baby.

Persons who called on Mr. Henry Knight in his private capacity rang at the side-door to the right of the shop, and were instructed by the shop-caretaker to mount two flights of stairs, having mounted which they would perceive in front of them a door, where they were to ring again. This door was usually closed, but to-night Tom found it ajar. He peeped out and downwards, and thought of the vast

showroom below and the wonderful regions of the street. Then he drew in his head, and concealed himself behind the plush portière. From his hiding-place he could watch the door of Uncle Henry's and Aunt Susan's bedroom, and he could also, whenever he felt inclined, glance down the stairway.

He waited, with the patience and the fatalism of infancy, for something to happen.

After an interval of time not mathematically to be computed, Tom heard a step on the stairs, and looked forth. A tall gentleman wearing a high hat and carrying a black bag was ascending. In a flash Tom recollected a talk with his dead father, in which that glorious and gay parent had explained to him that he, Tom, had been brought to his mother's room by the doctor in a black bag.

Tom pulled open the door at the head of the stairs, went outside, and drew the door to behind him.

'Are you the doctor?' he demanded, staring intently at the bag to see whether anything wriggled within.

'Yes, my man,' said the doctor. It was Quain Short, wrenched from the Alhambra.

'Well, they don't want another one. They've got one,' Tom asserted, still observing the bag.

'You're sure?'

'Yes. Aunt Annie said particularly that they didn't want another one.'

'Who is it that has come? Do you know his name? Christopher—is that it?'

'I don't know his name. But he's come, and he's in the bedroom now, with Aunt Susan.'

'How annoying!' said Dr. Quain Short under his breath, and he went.

Tom re-entered, and took up his old position behind the portière.

Presently he heard another step on the stair, and issued out again to reconnoitre. And, lo! another tall gentleman wearing another high hat and carrying another black bag was ascending.

'This makes three,' Tom said.

'What's that, my little man?' asked the gentleman, smiling. It was Dr. Christopher.

'This makes three. And they only want one. The first one came ever such a long time ago. And I can tell you Aunt Susan was very glad when he did come.'

'Dear, dear!' exclaimed Dr. Christopher. 'Then I'm too late, my little man. I was afraid I might be. Everything all right, eh?'

Tom nodded, and Dr. Christopher departed.

And then, after a further pause, up came another tall gentleman, high hat, and black bag.

'This is four,' said Tom.

'What's that, Tommy?' asked Mr. Henry Knight's regular physician and surgeon. 'What are you doing there?'

'One came hours since,' Tom said. 'And they don't want any more.' Then he gazed at the bag, which was larger and glossier than its predecessors. 'Have you brought a *very* nice one?' he inquired. 'They don't really want another, but perhaps if it's *very*——'

It was this momentary uncertainty on Tom's part that possibly saved my hero's life. For the parents were quite inexperienced, and Mrs. Puddiphatt was an accoucheuse of the sixties, and the newborn child was near to dying in the bedroom without anybody being aware of the fact.

'A very nice what?' the doctor questioned gruffly.

'Baby. In that bag,' Tom stammered.

'Out of the way, my bold buccaneer,' said the doctor, striding across the mat into the corridor.

At two o'clock the next morning, Tom being asleep, and all going well with wife and child, Mr. Henry Knight returned at length to his sitting-room, and resumed the composition of the letter to the editor of the *Standard*. The work existed as an artistic whole in his head, and he could not persuade himself to seek rest until he had got it down in black-and-white; for, though he wrote letters instead of sonnets, he was nevertheless a sort of a poet by temperament. You behold him calm now, master once more of his emotions, and not that agitated, pompous, and slightly ridiculous person who lately stamped over Oxford Street and stormed the Alhambra Theatre. And in order to help the excellent father of my hero back into your esteem, let me point out that the imminence and the actuality of fatherhood constitute a somewhat disturbing experience, which does not occur to a man every day.

Mr. Knight dipped pen in ink, and continued:

... who I hold to be not only the greatest poet, but also the greatest moral teacher that England has ever produced, "To thine own self be

true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

In conclusion, sir, I ask, without fear of contradiction, are we or are we not, in this matter of the National Debt, to be true to our national selves?

Yours obediently,

A CONSCIENTIOUS TAXPAYER

The signature troubled him. His pen hovered threateningly over it, and finally he struck it out and wrote instead: ‘Paterfamilias.’ He felt that this pseudonym was perhaps a little inapposite, but some impulse stronger than himself forced him to employ it.

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