

Fiction Extracts

This extract is from the short story 'News of the Engagement' by Arnold Bennett. In the story, a young man journeys home to the Midlands to visit his mother. He must tell her about his engagement to a woman he's hardly mentioned in his letters.

...

You see, I wrote to my mother regularly every week, telling her most of my doings. She knew all my friends by name. I dare say she formed in her mind notions of what sort of people they were. Thus I had frequently mentioned Agnes and her family in my letters. But you can't write even to your mother and say in cold blood: 'I think I am beginning to fall in love with Agnes', 'I think Agnes likes me', 'I am mad on her', 'I feel certain she likes me', 'I shall propose to her on such a day'. You can't do that. At least I couldn't. Hence it had come about that on the 20th of December I had proposed to Agnes and been accepted by Agnes, and my mother had no suspicion that my happiness was so near. And on the 22nd, by a previous and unalterable arrangement, I had come to spend Christmas with my mother.

I was the only son of a widow; I was all that my mother had. And lo! I had gone and engaged myself to a girl she had never seen, and I had kept her in the dark! She would certainly be extremely surprised, and she might be a little bit hurt – just at first. Anyhow, the situation was the least in the world delicate.

I walked up the whitened front steps of my mother's little house, just opposite where the electric cars stop, but before I could put my hand on the bell my little plump mother, in her black silk and her gold brooch and her auburn hair, opened to me, having doubtless watched me down the road from the bay-window, as usual, and she said, as usual, kissing me,

'Well, Philip! How are you?'

And I said,

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

I perceived instantly that she was more excited than my arrival ordinarily made her. There were tears in her smiling eyes, and she was as nervous as a young girl. She did indeed look remarkably young for a woman of forty-five, with twenty-five years of widowhood and a brief but too tempestuous married life behind her.

The thought flashed across my mind. 'By some means or other she has got wind of my engagement. But how?'

But I said nothing. I, too, was naturally rather nervous. Mothers are kittle cattle.

'I'll tell her at supper,' I decided.

And she hovered round me, like a sea-gull round a steamer, as I went upstairs.

There was a ring at the door. She flew, instead of letting the servant go. It was a porter with my bag.

Just as I was coming downstairs again there was another ring at the door. And my mother appeared magically out of the kitchen, but I was beforehand with her, and with a laugh I insisted on opening the front door myself this time.

In the second extract from the story, Philip, the narrator, is hoping that his mother's supper guest, Mr Nixon, will leave so that he can give his mother his exciting news. The story ends with Mr Nixon giving some news instead.

I went forth, bought a picture postcard showing St Luke's Square, Bursley, most untruthfully picturesque, and posted the card and the letter to my darling Agnes. I hoped that Mr Nixon would have departed ere my return; he had made no reference at all during supper to my mother's affairs. But he had not departed. I found him solitary in the drawing-room, smoking a very fine cigar.

'Where's the mater?' I demanded.

'She's just gone out of the room,' he said. 'Come and sit down. Have a weed. I want a bit of a chat with you, Philip.'

I obeyed, taking one of the very fine cigars.

'Well, Uncle Nixon,' I encouraged him, wishing to get the chat over because my mind was full of Agnes. I sometimes called him uncle for fun.

'Well, my boy,' he began. 'It's no use me beating about the bush. What do you think of me as a stepfather?'

I was struck, as they say down there, all of a heap.

'What?' I stammered. 'You don't mean to say - you and mother - ?'

He nodded.

'Yes, I do, lad. Yesterday she promised as she'd marry my unworthy self. It's been coming along for some time. But I don't expect she's given you any hint in her letters. In fact, I know she hasn't. It would have been rather difficult, wouldn't it? She couldn't well have written, "My dear Philip, an old friend, Mr Nixon, is falling in love with me and I believe I'm falling in love with him. One of these days he'll be proposing to me." She couldn't have written like that, could she?'

I laughed. I could not help it.

'Shakes hands,' I said warmly. 'I'm delighted.'

'The lad's delighted, Sarah,' said Mr Nixon shortly.

I said nothing about my own engagement that night. I had never thought of my mother as a woman with a future. I had never realized that she was desirable, and that a man might desire her, and that her lonely existence in that house was not all that she had the right to demand from life. And I was ashamed of my characteristic filial selfish egoism. So I decided that I would not intrude my joy on hers until the next morning. We live and learn.