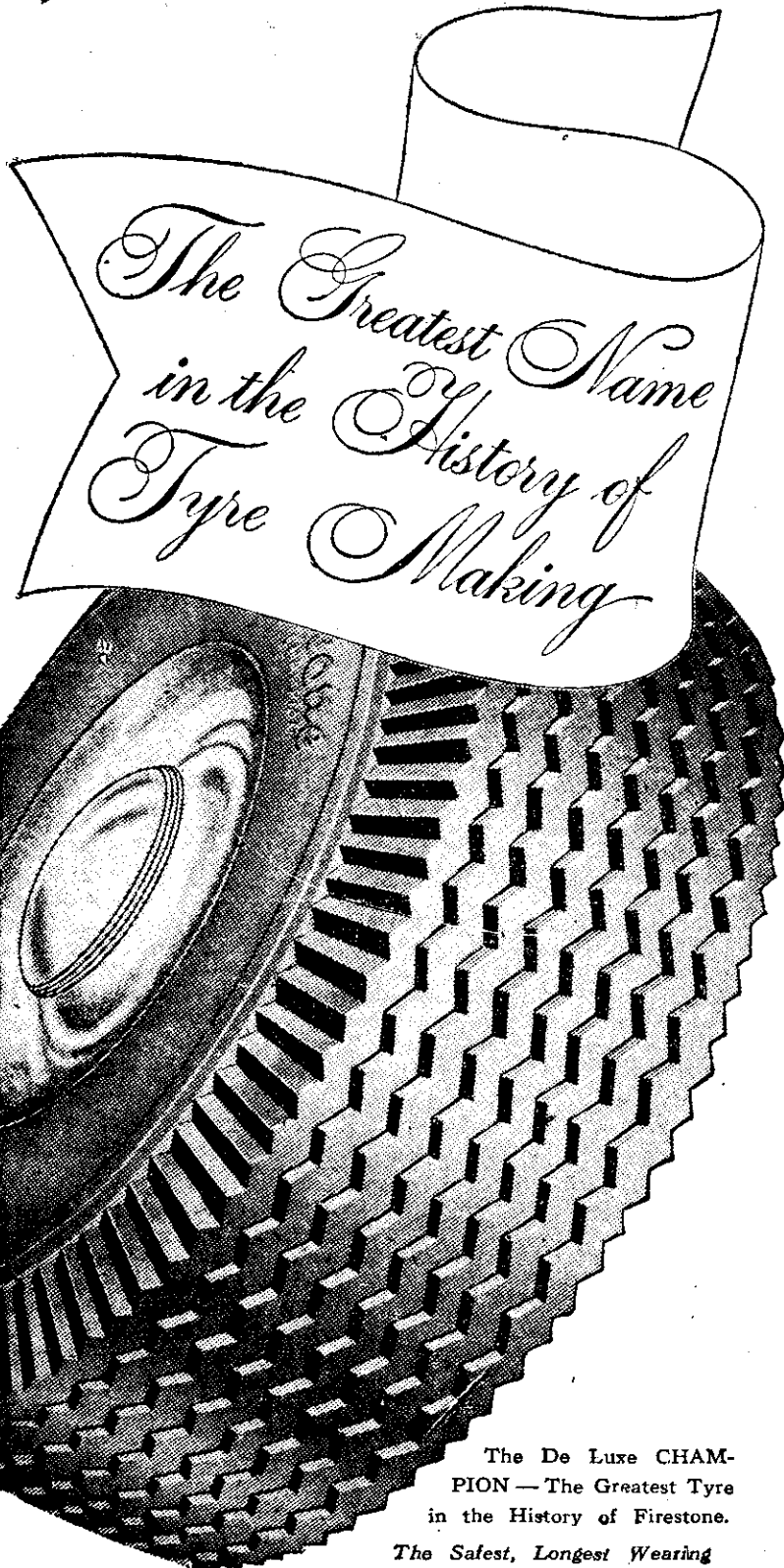


# Firestone



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## TALE OF TWO SISTERS

Premiere of Arnold Bennett Classic from Nelson Station



ARNOLD BENNETT

ONE evening in 1903 Arnold Bennett, aged 36, and not yet famous, went to dine at his usual restaurant in Paris. When he went to his customary table he found, as he noted down in his journal the next day, "a middle-aged woman, inordinately stout and with pendant cheeks," who rose as he sat down and went to a second table and then to a third. "Soon all the waitresses were privately laughing at the goings-on of the fat woman . . . 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 ten or 15,000 word short story, *The History of Two Old Women*. I gave this woman a sister, as fat as herself . . ."

So was born the idea of *The Old Wives' Tale*, the classic chronicle of the lives of Constance and Sophia Baine, daughters of an English midlands draper, from 1863, when they are respectively 16 and 15 years old, until Constance's death at 60. But Bennett did not start writing it until nearly four years after the incident recorded, and by the time he completed it the short story had grown to a length of 200,000 words.

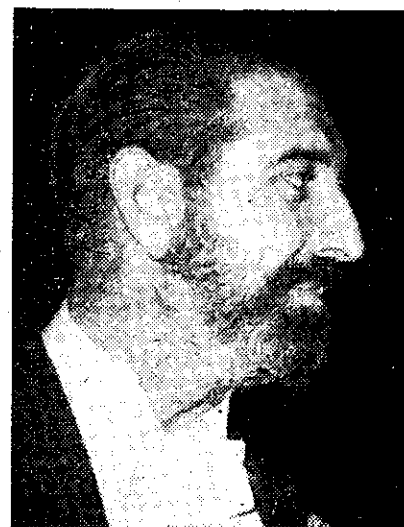
Even then, and despite the high quality of the work, he did not devote his full time to it in the eleven months (October 1907 to August 1908) during which it was written. In this period he also turned out half-a-dozen short stories, a play, about 50 newspaper articles, and the light novel *Buried Alive*.

Nevertheless, the novel is an outstanding expression of what one critic has called Arnold Bennett's "vision of the astounding bizarre of modern life," through which he recreated normal experience with a scrupulous fidelity which few have surpassed. The two sisters are contrasting types. Constance, a staid and sensible woman, marries Samuel Povey, the chief assistant in her father's shop, and spends all her life in their home town of Bursley. The more passionate and imaginative Sophia, however, elopes with Gerald Scales, a commercial traveller who has come into a fortune. Scales turns out to be an unprincipled blackguard who has to be forced to marry her, carries her off to Paris, exposes her to indignities, and finally deserts her. She struggles to success as a lodging-house keeper in Paris, lives through the siege of 1870, and is eventually reunited with Constance when they are both widows in middle age.

Although this is the story of two sisters, it is time, as E. M. Forster has aptly pointed out, which is the real hero of *The Old Wives' Tale*, and we watch Constance and Sophia grow into womanhood and old age in relation not only to a succession of characters older and younger than themselves, but also to the whole history of Bursley and the rest of the "Five Towns" district which Bennett was to make the subject of many of his subsequent novels.

A dramatized version of *The Old Wives' Tale*, as adapted by Muriel Levy and produced by Peter Watts, was recently broadcast by the BBC. Recordings made of the original broadcasts have now arrived here, and the first episode of the twelve-part serial will be heard from 2XN at 8.13 p.m. on Sunday, May 22.

### Oscar Natzka



ARRANGEMENTS have been made for portions of several of Oscar Natzka's concerts to be broadcast. He was heard from 1YA on May 5, and 2YZ on Thursday, May 12. During the coming week the second half of his Wellington concert will be broadcast from 2YA at 9.0 p.m. on Wednesday, May 18, and the second half of his Invercargill concert from 4YZ at 9.0 p.m. on Saturday, May 21. Portions of his concerts at Christchurch and Dunedin will also be broadcast.