LONDON MATCHGIRLS STRIKE
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Chapter 1: Agnes Wilson, 14 yer old worker for Bryant & May, June 1888

Boom
Boom
Boom

The drone of the factory surges in and out my ears, making my head spin as if I'm on a carousel, a carousel that never stops. I keep my head down. Concentrate on my work. I don't want Mr Bryant thinking I'm slacking, nobody does.

There's no clock in here. It feels like I've bene working for hours; the sweat already pouring off me like little droplets of rain. As I look through the nearest window, I see the morning rush of people, heads down, heading off to work. It must be 8.00 a.m., I say to myself. 2 hours complete. *Only 11 hours to go, 11 hours to go, 11 hours …*

My name is Agnes Wilson. I'm 14 years old and I work for the Bryant & May Match Factory in East London. Mother wishes I worked somewhere else, somewhere healthier, she says. But I don't have a choice; born in the slums of London, the factory is the only way my family can have a meal on the table and a bed at night.

I'm one of the 1,400 women and girls that work every day for a gruelling 14 hours. Pay? Less than 5 shillings a week (less than 60p). That's only if you work hard enough! The fine system rules supreme as the foreman imposes them every day. Drop a match – 1 shilling off your wage! Cut yourself on machinery – 2 shillings! Go to the toilet without permission – 3 shillings! Not only that, your working hours can be increased if you talk or go to the toilet. Yesterday Mary, a girl who works next to me, asked me if I minded picking up a match she'd accidentally dropped. She ended up working 15 hours for 3 shillings. And when poor Mary turned up late to work the next day, she'd been fined a half-day's pay. And they wonder why we look undersized and ghostly …

At 6.30 a.m., before the birds start chirping, my day starts. Tired I drag myself out of bed (the one I share with my 3 sisters), kiss Mother goodbye and lumber out the door. There are about 30 girls on my street making the same journey. Every morning. Every day.

As I turn the corner, the factory comes into view. Its murky shadow drowns me as smoke billows out of the tall, brick chimneys. The pungent smell of burning conquers this part of the city.

Once inside, I get to work making match after match after match. I dream of leaving this city so I never have to see another wretched match again! There's something else I never want to see again or smell again or look at again. Something else I never want to be *near* again.

Phosporous.

The deadly chemical I risk life and limb for.

It's used to make the matches every day. Phosphorous has been banned in Sweden and the USA but the British Government refuse to do this. They say "Banning phosphorous would be a restraint of free trade." I'll say, they're not working with it!

Phosphorous severely damages the health of us workers. Causing yellowing of the skin, hair loss and what I like to call 'phossy jaw'. It's something to be afraid of, petrified even! But oh, phossy jaw, a horrible bone cancer that eats you from the outside in. First the whole side of the victim's face turns green and black. Next, the now half rotten face of the sufferer begins to emit a foul-smelling pus. And finally … death.

'Phossy jaw' is something I fear. If I caught this contagion, not only my life, but the lives of my family would be over. With no-one to supply my family with a secure income, they would soon starve. Disease is a constant threat at the factory. Mother tells me to be careful. Not because she's worried for herself, but because she's worried for me, for my health, for my life. At least someone cares; at Bryant & May, the only thing they care about is profit.

Chapter 2: Annie Besant, Journalist for The Link, June 1888

Clutching my notebook and pen, I stand, shivering, outside the iron gates of the Bryant & May factory. They must be out soon, I say to myself. Surely, they *must.* However, a feeling of apprehension sweeps through my body; even if they do come out, would they even want to share their stories with me? I've heard ghastly rumours about this place. About how a worker must be made to try and overpower Bryant & May management. Was it really worth me doing this? But then I remember Clementina …

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I sit in the Fabian Society meeting in London, horrified by the tales about the pay and conditions of the women working at the Bryant & May factory. A woman stands on a platform, looking out at the audience, her eyes sparking. Behind me, a man whispers, "That's Clementina Black, that is." I watch in fascination as Clementina gives her speech on Female Labour. I decide this: it is up to me to help these poor women.

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As I stand there, lost in thought, I nearly miss the band of girls, walking quickly out the gates and to the streets beyond. This is my chance. Quickly, I walk towards them, my notebook and pen at the ready. There is a group of five or six workers in front of me.

"Excuse me" I shout as the backs of the group turn round to face me, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" The workers look confused but they nod and shuffle towards me, their eyes looking down.

I explain I'm from *The Link*, a weekly newspaper in London, and that I would like to interview them about their experiences of the factory. I tell them how I want things to change, how I am on their side, how I want them to have better working conditions and a better pay, I tell them that if they follow me in bringing Bryant & May to justice, I will be with them every step of the way.

At this point, some women turn away, shaking their heads. But in their faces I see longing, how they wish they could stand up to the detestable William Bryant and Francis May. I understand this. The fear of the factory management finding out their 'betrayal' stops these young women from sharing their story.

However, some women stay, with fire in their eyes and eagerness spread over their faces like butter. I realise that these women are the majority of the workers and even the ones that turned away before, are now standing round the outside of the group, listening in. I think their mind has been changed. It makes me aware of one important fact; we are all in this together.

I get out my writing equipment. Soon, stories are being flung at me like children throwing snowballs. One after another, each worker shares another horrifying tale of the factory.

A girl tells me she was told to 'never mind her fingers' when working with the machinery, even if it meant her being injured! I find out that many women and girls suffered from 'occasional blows' from the foreman. A lady named Lizzie tells me how there are no separate eating facilities, that workers eat at their benches with 'disease as the seasoning to their bread'. Gruesome rumours were soon exposed as the truth: girls are turned bald at 15 from the boxes they have to carry on their heads, workers are flung aside as soon as they are worked out. Many of these women have scars to prove it. The side of Lizzie's face is green and black, I guess it's phossy jaw.

Disgust overwhelms me. I am determined now, determined to help these women! I rush home and begin to write the article that will change these workers' lives for ever …

Chapter 3: William Bryant, Head of Bryant & May match factory, 23rd June 1988

Exclusive article by Annie Besant
WHITE SLAVERY IN LONDON
Shocking truth is revealed about the Bryant and May factory

Fury swallows me whole. I storm down to the workroom and smash open the door, my eyes bulging with frustration. How dare they! How dare they blather to the local paper telling 'stories' of *my* factory! Now, thanks to them, the future of my business is at stake! I hired them. I gave them a job. My factory is their only hope of survival. Without me, they would be nothing – NOTHING!

I stand there, my face reddening by the second 1400 workers sit before me, heads down. I can see one of them is wincing, as if she's preparing herself to be thumped. At least my power is still respected, I'll give them that.

"Which one of YOU cowards blabbed?" I bellow as my finger points at the shivering crowd. "I know you're all too STUPID to have an education, but really, I thought you'd know better, chatting to the papers like that." I stop to let the message sink in. But not for long; anger takes control again. "I'll get you for this, I will, I WILL! Now own up, who did it?!"

No one speaks. No one says a word.

Chapter 4: Annie Besant, Journalist for The Link, 5th July 1888

I stand there shaking with anger. My fingers grip the pencil in my pocket.

William Bryant had seen my article (and rightly so too!). But what he did next had made my blood run cold; he stormed into that workroom; frightened all the women there; then forced a group of them to sign a statement, saying they were happy with their working conditions. And when my strong, independent friends refused to do this, the stupid, ignorant William Bryant sacked them!

Not only that, when Mr Bryant was later interviewed by *The Star*, he claimed that the workers had been sacked for not following rules, being irregular and for 'lying about the Bryant & May factory conditions." He then continued to say that me, Annie Besant, and my 'ruddy article' had nothing to do with the sacking of the workers.

That's the problem with Bryant, you see, he likes to stick to the same thing, the same thing that he knows, the same thing that gets him stacks of cash every day. He's scared of change and he doesn't care if the current situation is hurting those around him. But now I'm going to show him, and so are the women behind me.

A strike.

We're going to prove to Bryant & May that they can't just shove their workers round, make them feel useless.

We want better pay.
We want better conditions
We want to be treated with respect.

So as I stand here on 5th July 1888 in the centre of London, with over 200 defenceless but brave young women, I know this: the battle is now between us and the humongous Bryant & May Match Factory.

Chapter 5: 14 years later. Anna Jones, 14 year old worker for Bryant & May (now 28 years old) July 1902.

I look up at the factory. The building used to overpower me, suppress me, but now, it greets me like an old friend. It seems like years since I've bene in that frightful place, teeming with grime and riddled with disease. Hardly anyone works there now. Not with what happened …

We won.

We exposed Bryant & May for what they really were. Tyrants. Bullies. Thugs. And who would've thought if? Bryant and May, with their tyrannical reign and intimidating ways, being brought down by a couple of feeble, undersized female workers, that had no wealth or education or power. But we did it alright, it took a gruelling three weeks, but we did it.

After the first strike, on the 5th July, Annie kept protesting and so did us workers. Annie was our leader, our protector, our only chance of survival.

More marches were organised and all of us from the factory refused to go back to work. Of course, like many, I was scared. Without any money coming in, how long was it going to take before my family starved?

However, things seemed to get better; the day after the first strike, three more journalists joined Annie in the campaign: William Stead, Henry Champion and Catherine Booth. Annie said they were famous people and would help our story get more awareness. I thoroughly hoped so! With the spirits so high and with victory after victory, I became convinced that we would win! No way would we give in to Bryant & May now!

If it wasn't for my idea that it would be easy to defeat Bryant & May, maybe it wouldn't have bene such a shock to me when things started to go wrong ….

The Times blasted Annie and blamed her and other socialists for the dispute. To my utter disgust, they also supported Bryant & May.

Protest after protest ended with conflict with the police.

I became angry. Why couldn't they just leave us alone? Let us stand up for what's right?!! I knew what they thought. According to them, we were just working class women with no voice and no understanding of anything. To them, it really didn't matter if we were flung out on the streets and left to die.

But once again, Annie persisted. I owed that woman everything; I would've given up on my own. She had a brilliant idea.

A boycott.

Simple but effective, she said. With the help of the newspapers that were on our side, a boycott was launched against Bryant & May. And effective it was …

Bryant & May got a bad image in the papers. Profits dropped drastically. Income was thin on the ground. There was only one way to solve it. To this day, I still wish I could've seen the look of defeat on William Bryant's and Francis May's faces.

The company announced that it was willing to re-employ the women on strike as it was worried about the business's public image. Bryant & May also agreed to bring in new health and safety rules. They promised to bring an end to the fines system, ensure healthier conditions and better pay. Meals were to be taken in a separate room, where the food could not be contaminated with the deadly phosphorous.

When i walked into work the next morning, it was clear Bryant & May had finally kept their promises. And one thing was certain. They weren't going to mess with the matchgirls again!