

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-28297-0 - The Foolish Virgin  
Margaret Penn  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## CHAPTER I

## THE NATION OF LONDON

**I**N the year 1910, on a dark, rainy afternoon in late October, a young girl, trembling with excitement, stared out at the receding grey roofs of Manchester as the train in which she sat gathered speed on its journey to London. Her name was Hilda Winstanley, and for fourteen years she had lived, as the foster-child of simple, labouring people, in the obscure village of Moss Ferry, fourteen miles from Manchester. Suddenly and surprisingly she had been summoned to London to make her home with relations hitherto totally unknown to her, her father's people. This journey to London was the most tremendous thing that had ever happened to her; and the wonder of it, though anticipated at fever-pitch for the past three weeks, was still so overwhelming that her Aunt Mildred, sitting in the corner opposite, felt apprehensively that at any minute the girl might burst into tears, in spite of the fact that they were not alone in the compartment. For this reason, in the strangeness of their first acquaintance, conversation between them was awkward and spasmodic, and Hilda could not but feel relieved when her aunt, after handing her a small bunch of grapes and a magazine, settled down to read her newspaper.

Hilda ate the grapes, the first she had ever tasted, slowly and appreciatively, but the magazine lay neglected by her side until, with the closing-in of the day, she could no longer look out at the country flying past. London! She whispered it under her breath, the magic word growing ever larger until it seemed to fill the now brightly-lit carriage like a banner. The train clanged on, and Hilda, awed by the calmness with which her aunt

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-28297-0 - The Foolish Virgin  
Margaret Penn  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## THE FOOLISH VIRGIN

steadily read through the *Daily News*, as if a journey to London were the most ordinary thing in the world, made a polite effort to interest herself in the magazine, but found to her astonishment that the words and the illustrations conveyed nothing: they were all slurred together, and across each page, in rubricated type several inches high, she read: 'I am Hilda Winstanley, from Moss Ferry, near Manchester, and I'm going to live in London. I don't really believe it even yet, but I've left Moss Ferry for ever and ever, and I'm going to London, to live there, with my new relations, ALL MY LIFE! AMEN!' When, quite as a matter of course, Aunt Mildred passed over the newspaper to her, Hilda, from pure gratitude at thus being regarded as an equal, made a conscientious effort to collect her wits and read it as calmly as her aunt had done; but again found she could not concentrate on it. Holding its pages wide and pretending to read, she luxuriated in the marvel of this journey to the great city and in anticipation of the splendours which there awaited her: Buckingham Palace and the King and Queen; the Olympia and the Crystal Palace; Hyde Park and the Tower of London; Oxford Street and its great shops; the Horse Guards in a place called Whitehall; the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey; St. Paul's Cathedral and the River Thames; the National Gallery and Kew Gardens. The enchanting pictures glowed and flickered across the sober pages of the *Daily News*. Why, she might even see the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, and the Alhambra in Leicester Square, not to mention the world-renowned Gaiety Theatre, where the most beautiful girls in England sang and danced their way into the heart of an adoring public until, ultimately, an eager and discerning peerage besought them in marriage. Back in Moss Ferry she had accumulated a magnificent collection of cigarette-cards which depicted these charming young

## THE NATION OF LONDON

ladies: Cissie Loftus and Evie Greene; Zena Dare and Edna May: all lovely, and loveliest of them all, with a face as delicate as a harebell, Lily Elsie. Mrs. Winstanley, her strict, chapel-going foster-mother, had gazed reverently upon the picture of Miss Lily Elsie and had found no fault in her, though she had deplored the necessity which drove all these young ladies to earn their living in so godless a place as the theatre, and expressed the most fervent thankfulness and approval whenever one of them was persuaded to grace a stately home of England and thus remove herself for ever from Temptation.

Hilda looked shyly over at her aunt, who was leaning back with her eyes closed. How dignified and handsome she was, with long, beautiful hands, and dark, good, quiet clothes, the sort of clothes they sold in the fine shops in St. Ann's Square, Manchester, in one of which Hilda had spent several happy months with a view to astonishing the world, at some subsequent date, in the role of a properly accredited court dressmaker. For the first time since leaving Manchester her thoughts returned to Moss Ferry, and she wondered if her foster-father was home again after handing her over to Aunt Mildred at the Central Station. If so, the family would be having their special Saturday tea of newly-baked tea-cakes swimming in butter and topped with golden syrup, Saturday being baking-day. They would of course be talking about her and asking each other if she could have got to London yet. Her foster-mother would cry and accuse her of black ingratitude for having left them so eagerly after all they had done for her. Her husband would tell her not to take on so, and repeat many times the undeniable truth that Hilda had got into good hands and that there was no call for uneasiness about her new relations, he having had the honour of meeting one of them. Lily, her foster-sister, would be spiteful with envy; Jim, the youngest

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-28297-0 - The Foolish Virgin  
Margaret Penn  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## THE FOOLISH VIRGIN

son, would be glad to be shut of her la-di-da ways and provoking tongue, and would frankly say so. The elder son, John, would miss her, though he was so taken up with Edie, his sweetheart, that it would not be for very long. John had always been fonder of her, Hilda reflected complacently, than of Lily, his own sister.

What letters she would soon be writing them! She was already beginning to think out her first, telling them how happy she was in her grand new home, when she felt the train slackening speed. London! Here it was at last! Aunt Mildred opened her eyes and smiled at her.

'Here we are, Hilda. This is London. St. Pancras Station. It won't be long now before we are home. We live in Chiswick, near the river. We take the Underground from here, and we shall be there in no time. Get your basket down, child, and put on your hat. Do you feel excited?'

Hilda, almost crying with joy, could not trust herself to answer save by a nod. St. Pancras Station, London! Chiswick! The river! The Underground Railway! When she lived in Moss Ferry, London had always seemed so absolutely unattainable — right across the world — and now here she was actually in it, surging along with hundreds of other travellers, and keeping so close to her aunt lest she should lose her that she was a menace with her rush-basket to more than one hurrying passenger on the crowded platform. She had never before been in such a scene of bustle and confusion, not even in Manchester, now disloyally dwindling in her mind to the status of just an ordinary town.

Aunt Mildred walked quickly to a wide brilliantly lighted entrance which announced itself in enormous lettering as UNDERGROUND, with Hilda, too bewildered to be aware of anything but noise and light and hurry, almost running to keep safely alongside, so great was her

## THE NATION OF LONDON

terror of getting lost in the crowd. Manchester was nothing to this. People there pursued their business in a quiet, leisurely fashion, like responsible human beings. Here everybody seemed mazed and frightened, as if they had come from nowhere and were going nowhere, but all in such a tear that one would think the Old Lad himself was after them and they had to go forward or be dragged back by him into the darkness.

Her aunt, sensing Hilda's fears, took her arm and moved less quickly, assuring her that there was no need to feel nervous. London was always like this, she explained, but one soon got accustomed to it. Within a week Hilda would feel as if she had lived in it for years. Hilda, however, was not so sure. Fearful tales came into her mind of young girls like herself who had disappeared in London and never been seen again by their families. She recalled her foster-mother's urgent warnings never to allow a stranger, man or woman, to speak to her in any circumstances whatsoever. Afraid of appearing stupid in her anxiety not to get lost, she mentioned these warnings to Aunt Mildred.

'Mrs. Winstanley was quite right, Hilda. You must never let *any* stranger talk to you in London, but you're a big girl and should be able to look after yourself. People in London are just the same as people in Manchester, the only difference is that there are more of them.'

By this time, however, Hilda's terror of London was so great that her disloyalty to Manchester had vanished, and she privately concluded that, in spite of its crowds, London had nothing whatever over Manchester. Folks there, even in a crowd, looked like folks, and not a gigantic jumble of liquorice all-sorts. As they went down the wide steps to the fabulous Underground, terror seized upon her like a palsy, and at that moment she would gladly and humbly have abandoned all her dreams of

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-28297-0 - The Foolish Virgin  
Margaret Penn  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## THE FOOLISH VIRGIN

becoming a citizen of London if by some miracle she could have got into a north-bound train and back to the safety of her home in Moss Ferry. But in no time at all they were waiting on their proper platform, and Aunt Mildred, realizing her niece's agitation, assured her once more that they were nearly home, and here was their train. Hilda stood spell-bound as it emerged from the tunnel, and would have missed it had not her aunt pushed her quickly in. The conductor clanged to the iron gates, and once again Hilda found herself sitting opposite Aunt Mildred. The fear occasioned by the crowds began to leave her, and she looked about her curiously. How bright the long carriage was and how quickly they came to the different stations, and how funny that no matter how many people got out just as many seemed immediately to get in! When they came to Holborn, Hilda called out the name, and coloured painfully at the smiles this simple act evoked from people sitting near. Aunt Mildred smiled too, but in a friendly way, and came quietly to the rescue.

'You don't pronounce the "l", Hilda. It's the same with Chiswick — you leave out the "w". Don't worry. There are lots of little things like this in London and it doesn't matter in the least if you get them wrong at first. Take no notice if people smile. They wouldn't do any better if they came up against some of your Lancashire names.'

Hilda, reassured, fixed her grey eyes steadily on the nearest of the barbarians, and, though the effort made her feel quite shaky inside, stared back until they in their turn grew embarrassed and retreated behind their evening papers. This strange, brilliant journey through the very bowels of London ended far too quickly, and she kept very close to her aunt as they emerged once more into what seemed to her a monster fair-ground of light and movement and noise.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-28297-0 - The Foolish Virgin  
Margaret Penn  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## THE NATION OF LONDON

‘Hammersmith Broadway,’ explained Aunt Mildred. ‘Look, there’s our bus. Keep near to me, child,’ she urged unnecessarily, ‘and do try to walk more quickly. Everybody in London is always in a hurry and you just have to keep up with them or get left behind.’

Hilda obediently quickened her steps. In her whole life she had never witnessed such a scurry as in this last half-hour, and she was immensely relieved when they got off the bus and made their way down a quiet road.

Taking her arm, Aunt Mildred too seemed relieved. ‘At last we can really talk,’ she began. ‘I expect your Grandma has told you that we are your real relatives, your own father’s people. He was our eldest brother. There are three of us at home — myself, my sister Helen, and her husband, Phillip Shephard. When your Grandma wrote and told us how restless you were getting, we thought it would be nice to have you make your home with us. But here we are — Glynne Mansions. Our flat, No. 40, is right at the top, looking over the Thames.’

Hilda, awed by the vast size of the building they had entered, followed her aunt nervously up its wide stone stairs. She had no conception of what a flat was like, though she knew from her reading that people in big cities lived in such queer places instead of in proper houses. The stairs seemed endless, but at last they were at the very top, and, shaking anew with excitement and fear, Hilda stood in the square windowless hall of her new home. Before she had time even to glance round, a door opened and a deep, penetrating voice called out: ‘Welcome home, Hilda! I am your Aunt Helen, and this is my husband, your Uncle Phillip.’ Hilda, confused, and crimson to the ears, was drawn into a warm, beautiful sitting-room and kissed by her new relations, who then just stood and stared at her as if she was the first young girl they had ever seen. She did not know what to say or where to look. Despite

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-28297-0 - The Foolish Virgin  
Margaret Penn  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## THE FOOLISH VIRGIN

their affectionate greeting, for the first time in her life she felt utterly alone and helpless, and, unable to check herself, burst into tears.

Aunt Helen was the first to act. Taking her hand, and pretending not to notice the tears, she led her into another room which, she explained, was her bedroom, her very own. Hilda, between her sobs, looked about her and wondered what her aunt meant by bedroom, since there was no sign of anybody ever having used it for the simple purpose of going to bed. Along one wall there was a low couch covered with a brocaded cloth and piled with matching cushions. Hilda took this to be positively the last word in fashionable sofas, but Helen called it a 'divan', and, observing her niece's puzzled stare, explained: 'This is your bed, Hilda. All you have to do is to take off the cover, slip two of the cushions into pillow-slips, and there you are. We want you to feel that this room is absolutely your own, to come to whenever you like. There's not as much room in a flat as in a house, and consequently every inch of space has to be utilized. That's why we've made your room look like a sitting-room. This built-in cupboard is for your clothes. I'll show you the bathroom, and when you've had a wash and tidied up, we'll have supper.' She turned away, calling over her shoulder: 'And please put out the light, Hilda. Always remember to do this whenever you leave your room.'

Hilda, all obedience, looked up fearfully at the light, and wondered how she was going to reach it. This was her first contact with electricity, for the workroom and shop in Manchester had been lit throughout by gas, and in her bewilderment at her new surroundings she had not noticed her aunt switch the light on by the door when they entered the room. Helen, waiting in the hall, called out impatiently: 'Come along, Hilda. Whatever are you doing?'



## THE NATION OF LONDON

Hilda jumped on to a chair, steadied the parchment shade between her hands, and blew vigorously. Nothing happened, and she blew again, growing hot and cold with anxiety at being unable to perform the first little thing her aunt had asked of her. Helen, overhearing these extraordinary exertions, came back to the doorway, and at the amazing sight exclaimed under her breath: 'Is it possible? Is it really possible?' Hilda, quite breathless, looked down at her and said apologetically: 'It won't go out, although I've blown ever so hard.'

Helen smiled. 'All right, dear. Get down. See, this is all you do.' She switched the light off and on, and Hilda, covered with shame at her own ignorance, smiled propitiatingly and followed her to the bathroom.

'Here we are,' said her aunt brightly. 'When you want hot water you light the geyser, like this. There, turn the tap on yourself. Now off. And don't go trying to blow the gas out, Hilda, or heaven knows what will happen. It's simple enough, isn't it? When you're ready, come back to the sitting-room. And don't feel worried or frightened about us. You'll soon settle down.'

The instant she was alone, Hilda gingerly approached the geyser, half expecting to be blown to smithereens as she lit the pilot jet. The bathroom itself did not intimidate her, for it was not so very different from the one at the Vicarage in Moss Ferry where, in a voluminous sacking apron, she had earned her first pocket-money. But the geyser was pure magic. What a letter she would be able to write to Moss Ferry about it! Hot water gushing out by merely applying a match! At the Vicarage they had to light the big kitchen range and get a great fire going before the water was even warm. They simply wouldn't believe it when she described this miracle. She could hear her foster-mother's incredulous 'Nay! Ah never did!' when Lily read out the startling news. Having washed

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-28297-0 - The Foolish Virgin  
Margaret Penn  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## THE FOOLISH VIRGIN

her hands and face, she drew her palms along the smooth white surface of the bath, already impatient for the night to come when she could legitimately get into it. That of course would not be for a whole week yet. This was Saturday, and before the kitchen-fire in Moss Ferry she had only last night had her wash all over for the week. If only she had known, she would have waited another day and had it in this clean, shining room; it had not yet occurred to her that perhaps her new relations, like the Vicar in Moss Ferry, washed all over every day, and not with ritualistic thoroughness once a week as they all did in the cottages.

Her admiring eyes took in every luxurious detail — the thick, white, soft towels, the scented soap, the mat by the bath made apparently of little corks stuck together; the forest of sponges, nail-brushes and tooth-brushes, the wooden pegs on which the towels hung, an initial over each peg, and, glorious to behold, a newly-painted 'H' over one of them for her. Her own room, and her own towel! To say nothing of the flush lavatory which, though familiar by virtue of her service at the Vicarage and her work at Hankinson & Sankey's in Manchester, here took on a new splendour because it was actually in her own home. Though nature did not exact it, she could not resist giving the chain a possessive pull as she went to face the ordeal of getting to know her astonishing new relations.

As she crossed the little hall, Hilda, hearing her own name mentioned, stood and listened at the door. She knew that this was a shocking thing to do and that listeners seldom heard any good of themselves, but for once this maxim proved wrong. Her Uncle Phillip was talking about her, and the tone of his voice arrested her attention.

'Of course she's gawky and awkward,' he was saying, apparently to Aunt Helen, 'but then most girls of fourteen