

**TOM; OR, A
WOMAN'S
WORK FOR JESUS**

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Tom; Or, a Woman's Work for Jesus by T. Woolmer

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T. WOOLMER

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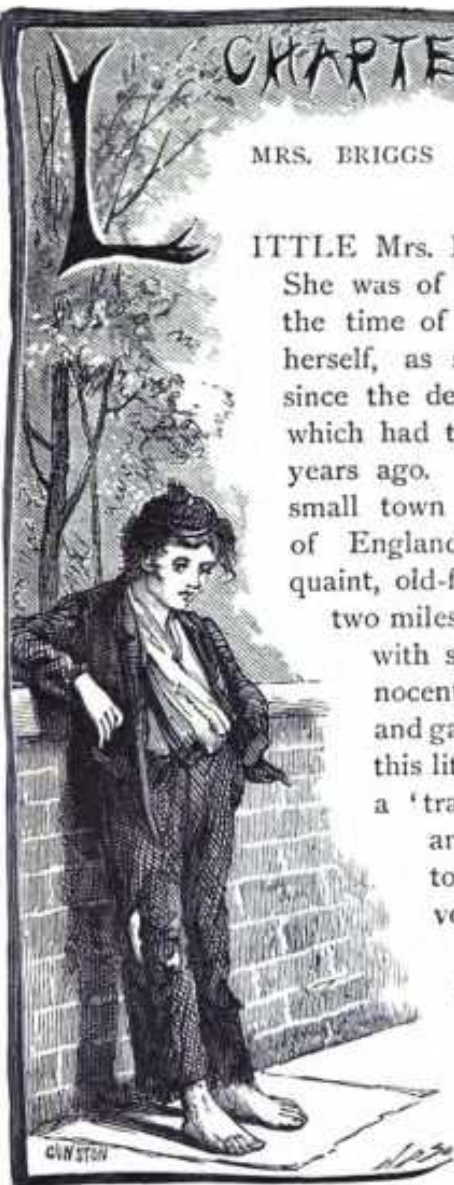
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CHAPTER I.

MRS. BRIGGS AND HER ERRAND BOY.



LITTLE Mrs. Briggs was a widow. She was of middle age, and, at the time of our story, lived by herself, as she had done ever since the death of her husband, which had taken place some ten years ago. She resided in a small town in the central part of England — a pretty, little, quaint, old-fashioned rural town, two miles from a railway, and with streets which were innocent alike of pavement and gas. Yet, small as was this little town, it possessed a 'trade.' It was one of an interesting group of towns and villages devoted to manufacturing, from straw, hats and bonnets of every imaginable shape, size, and kind, for men and women, boys and girls.

This industry

furnished employment of one kind or another for most of the women in the place, old, middle-aged, and young, but chiefly the last. These spent their time in alternately fabricating straw hats and bonnets, and converting the straw itself into the plait of which the hats and bonnets were made; a clean, light, and useful employment, dear reader, but not a very remunerative one.

While what was called the 'sewing season' lasted—that is to say, during the first four or five months of the year, when the women were employed in making up the plait, with needle and thread, into hats and bonnets—the wages they could earn were fairly good. This was their *harvest time*; and, by dint of great diligence and the utmost economy, they could procure sufficient money during these few months to keep them in tolerable comfort for the time, and enable them to lay by a little against the days when the remunerative 'sewing season' would be over. But to those who were not careful during the 'sewing season' the remainder of the year brought little save starvation. It was pleasant, no doubt, on bright summer days, to see, at the cottage doors, the little groups of girls and women busy with their plaiting, and deeply interesting to watch the slender and shining

strips of straw glancing quickly in their nimble fingers, which sometimes vainly strove to keep pace with their still more nimble tongues; or to meet the plaiters by twos and threes in the fields and lanes, still busy as they walked with their light and cleanly work. But it detracted not a little from the pleasure afforded by these sights to know that, though the poor creatures worked their fingers to the bone, they could scarcely, at the utmost, earn more than enough to buy the bread they needed for the day.

The straw trade supplied the little town with several other branches of industry beside the 'plaiting' and the 'sewing.' From the time when it leaves the threshing machine until it is exhibited for sale in the shape of a clean, cool hat or bonnet in the milliner's shop window, there are many processes through which the straw must pass. It must be manipulated by several pairs of hands, before it is ready even for the plaiters. First of all, the faulty and useless straws must be weeded out. Then come the cutting, sorting, and splitting of those straws which are considered fit for use. These and other operations furnish employment for great numbers of both men and women. And, in addition to all this, the selling of the