



Penguin Modern Classics

Arnold Bennett

The Grim Smile of the Five Towns



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

THE GRIM SMILE OF THE
FIVE TOWNS

Arnold Bennett was born in 1867 in the 'Potteries' – the region of England about which almost all his best novels were written. After studying art for a time, he began to prepare for his father's profession, that of solicitor; and at twenty-one he left Staffordshire to work in the office of a London firm.

He wrote a novel called *A Man from the North*, having meanwhile become assistant editor of a woman's weekly. Later he edited this paper, and noticed that the serial stories which were offered to him by a literary syndicate were not as good as they should have been. He wrote a serial and sold it to the syndicate for £75. This sale encouraged him to write another, which became famous. It was *The Grand Babylon Hotel*.

He also wrote much serious criticism, and a serious novel, *Anna of the Five Towns*; and at last decided to give up his editorship and devote himself wholly to writing. This decision took him to Paris, where in the course of the next eight years he wrote a number of novels, several plays, and, at length, *The Old Wives' Tale*, which was an immediate success throughout the English-speaking world.

Subsequently Bennett wrote many other books, ranging from the farce of *The Card* to the elaborate documentation of *Imperial Palace*, and when he died in 1931 he was one of the best-loved figures in literary London, as well as being famous abroad.



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THE GRIM SMILE OF THE FIVE TOWNS

ARNOLD BENNETT



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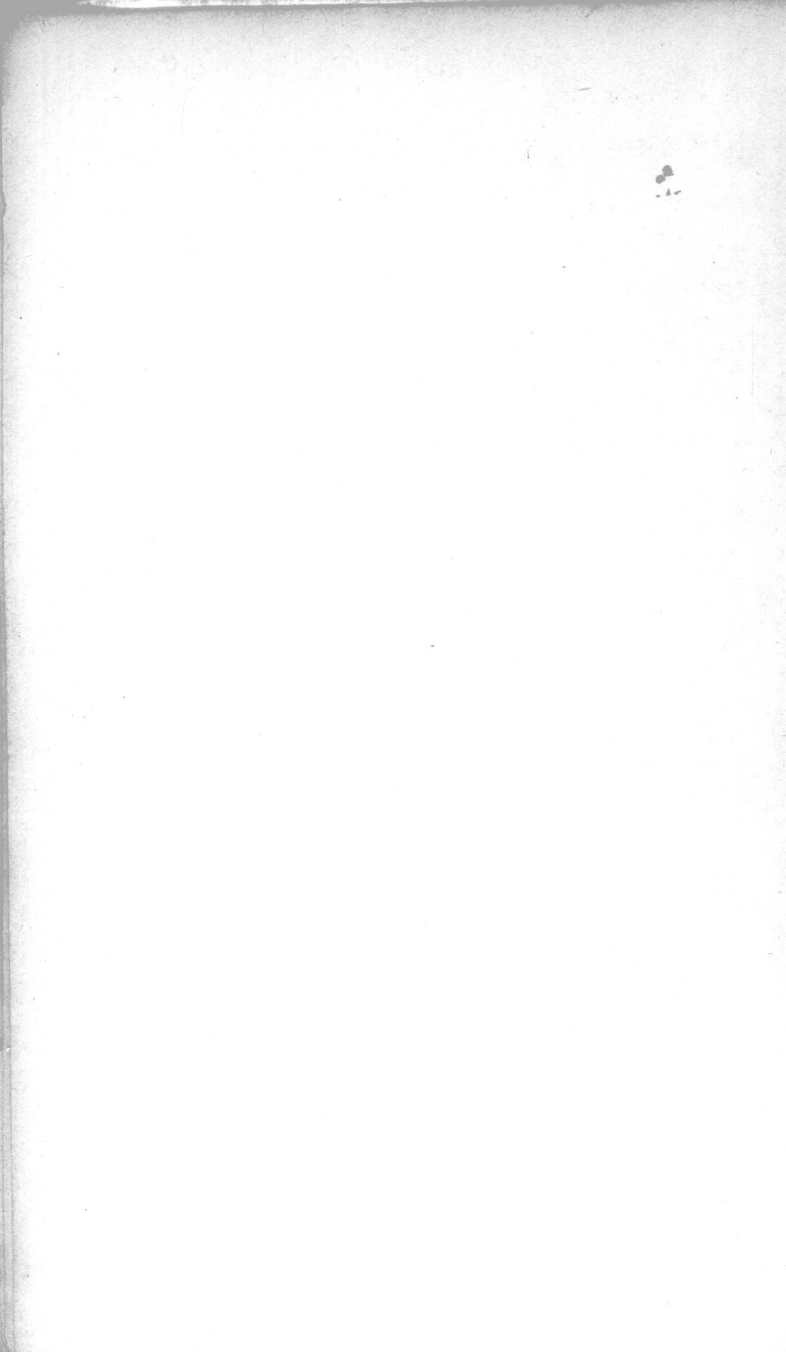
To my old and constant friend

JOSEPH DAWSON

a student profoundly versed

in the human nature of

the Five Towns



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THE LION'S SHARE

I

IN the Five Towns the following history is related by those who know it as something side-splittingly funny – as one of the best jokes that ever occurred in a district devoted to jokes. And I, too, have hitherto regarded it as such. But upon my soul, now that I come to write it down, it strikes me as being, after all, a pretty grim tragedy. However, you shall judge, and laugh or cry as you please.

It began in the little house of Mrs Carpole, up at Bleakridge, on the hill between Bursley and Hanbridge. Mrs Carpole was the second Mrs Carpole, and her husband was dead. She had a stepson, Horace, and a son of her own, Sidney. Horace is the hero, or the villain, of the history. On the day when the unfortunate affair began he was nineteen years old, and a model youth. Not only was he getting on in business, not only did he give half his evenings to the study of the chemistry of pottery and the other half to various secretaryships in connection with the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel and Sunday-school, not only did he save money, not only was he a comfort to his stepmother and a sort of uncle to Sidney, not only was he an early riser, a total abstainer, a non-smoker, and a good listener; but, in addition to the practice of these manifold and rare virtues, he found time, even at that tender age, to pay his tailor's bill promptly and to fold his trousers in the same crease every night – so that he always looked neat and dignified. Strange to say, he made no friends. Perhaps he was just a thought too perfect for a district like the Five Towns; a sin or so might have endeared him to the entire neighbourhood. Perhaps his loneliness was due to his imperfect sense of humour, or perhaps to the dull, unsmiling heaviness of his somewhat flat features.

Sidney was quite a different story. Sidney, to use his mother's phrase, was a little jockey. His years were then eight. Fair-haired and blue-eyed, as most little jockeys are, he had a smile

and a scowl that were equally effective in tyrannizing over both his mother and Horace, and he was beloved by everybody. Women turned to look at him in the street. Unhappily, his health was not good. He was afflicted by a slight deafness, which, however, the doctor said he would grow out of; the doctor predicted for him a lusty manhood. In the meantime, he caught every disease that happened to be about, and nearly died of each one. His latest acquisition had been scarlet fever. Now one afternoon, after he had 'peeled' and his room had been disinfected, and he was beginning to walk again, Horace came home and decided that Sidney should be brought downstairs for tea as a treat, to celebrate his convalescence, and that he, Horace, would carry him downstairs. Mrs Carpole was delighted with the idea, and Sidney also, except that Sidney did not want to be carried downstairs — he wanted to walk down.

'I think it will be better for him to walk, Horace dear,' said Mrs Carpole, in her thin, plaintive voice. 'He can, quite well. And you know how clumsy you are. Supposing you were to fall!'

Horace, nevertheless, in pursuance of his programme of being uncle to Sidney, was determined to carry Sidney. And carry Sidney he did, despite warnings and kickings. At least he carried him as far as the turn in the steep stairs, at which point he fell, just as his stepmother had feared, and Sidney with him. The half-brothers arrived on the ground floor in company, but Horace, with his eleven stone two, was on top, and the poor suffering little convalescent lay moveless and insensible.

It took the doctor forty minutes to bring him to, and all the time the odour of grilled herrings, which formed part of the uneaten tea, made itself felt through the house like a Satanic comment on the spectacle of human life. The scene was dreadful at first. The agony then passed. There were no bruises on the boy, not a mark, and in a couple of hours he seemed to be perfectly himself. Horace breathed again, and thanked Heaven it was no worse. His gratitude to Heaven was, however, slightly premature, for in the black middle of the night poor Sidney was seized with excruciating pains in the head, and the doctor lost four hours' sleep. These pains returned at intervals of a few

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days, and naturally the child's convalescence was retarded. Then Horace said that Mrs Carpole should take Sidney to Buxton for a fortnight, and he paid all the expenses of the trip out of his savings. He was desolated, utterly stricken; he said he should never forgive himself. Sidney improved, slowly.

II

After several months, during which Horace had given up all his limited spare time to the superintendence of the child's first steps in knowledge, Sidney was judged to be sufficiently strong to go to school, and it was arranged that he should attend the Endowed School at the Wedgwood Institution. Horace accompanied him thither on the opening day of the term – it was an inclement morning in January – and left the young delicate sprig, apparently joyous and content, to the care of his masters and the mercy of his companions. But Sidney came home for dinner weeping – weeping in spite of his new mortar-board cap, his new satchel, his new box of compasses, and his new books. His mother kept him at home in the afternoon, and by the evening another of those terrible attacks had supervened. The doctor and Horace and Mrs Carpole once more lost much precious sleep. The mysterious malady continued. School was out of the question.

And when Sidney took the air, in charge of his mother, everybody stopped to sympathize with him and to stroke his curls and call him a poor dear, and also to commiserate Mrs Carpole. As for Horace, Bursley tried to feel sorry for Horace, but it only succeeded in showing Horace that it was hiding a sentiment of indignation against him. Each friendly face as it passed Horace in the street said, without words, 'There goes the youth who probably ruined his young stepbrother's life. And through sheer obstinacy too! He dropped the little darling in spite of warnings and protests, and then fell on the top of him. Of course, he didn't do it on purpose, but –'

The doctor mentioned Greatorex of Manchester, the celebrated brain specialist. And Horace took Sidney to Manchester. They had to wait an hour and a quarter to see Greatorex, his

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well-known consulting-rooms in John Dalton Street being crowded with imperfect brains; but their turn came at last, and they found themselves in Greatorex's presence. Greatorex was a fat man, with the voice of a thin man, who seemed to spend the whole of his career in the care of his fingernails.

'Well, my little fellow,' said Greatorex, 'don't cry.' (For Sidney was already crying.) And then to Horace, in a curt tone: 'What is it?'

And Horace was obliged to humiliate himself and relate the accident in detail, together with all that had subsequently happened.

'Yes, yes, yes, yes!' Greatorex would punctuate the recital, and when tired of 'yes' he would say 'Hum, hum, hum, hum!'

When he had said 'hum' seventy-two times he suddenly remarked that his fee was three guineas, and told Horace to strengthen Sidney all he could, not to work him too hard, and to bring him back in a year's time.

Horace paid the money, Greatorex emitted a final 'hum', and then the stepbrothers were whisked out by an expeditious footman. The experience cost Horace over four pounds and the loss of a day's time. And the worst was that Sidney had a violent attack that very night.

School being impossible for him, Sidney had intermittent instruction from professors of both sexes at home. But he learnt practically nothing except the banjo. Horace had to buy him a banjo: it cost the best part of a ten-pound note; still, Horace could do no less. Sidney's stature grew rapidly; his general health certainly improved, yet not completely; he always had a fragile, interesting air. Moreover, his deafness did not disappear: there were occasions when it was extremely pronounced. And he was never quite safe from these attacks in the head. He spent a month or six weeks each year in the expensive bracing atmosphere of some seaside resort, and altogether he was decidedly a heavy drain on Horace's resources. People were aware of this, and they said that Horace ought to be happy that he was *in a position* to spend money freely on his poor brother. Had not the doctor predicted, before the catastrophe due to Horace's culp-

able negligence, that Sidney would grow into a strong man, and that his deafness would leave him? The truth was, one never knew the end of those accidents in infancy! Further, was not Sidney's sad condition slowly killing his mother? It was whispered about that, since the disaster, Sidney had not been *quite* sound mentally. Was not the mere suspicion of this enough to kill any mother?

And, as a fact, Mrs Carpole did die. She died of quinsy, doubtless aggravated by Sidney's sad condition.

Not long afterwards Horace came into a small fortune from his maternal grandfather. But poor Sidney did not come into any fortune, and people somehow illogically inferred that Horace had not behaved quite nicely in coming into a fortune while his suffering invalid brother, whom he had so deeply harmed, came into nothing. Even Horace had compunctions due to the visitations of a similar idea. And with part of the fortune he bought a house with a large garden up at Toft End, the highest hill of the hilly Five Towns, so that Sidney might have the benefit of the air. He also engaged a housekeeper and servants. With the remainder of the fortune he obtained a partnership in the firm of earthenware manufacturers for whom he had been acting as highly-paid manager.

Sidney reached the age of eighteen, and was most effective to look upon, his bright hair being still curly, and his eyes a wondrous blue, and his form elegant; and the question of Sidney's future arose. His health was steadily on the up grade. The deafness had quite disappeared. He had inclinations towards art, and had already amused himself by painting some beautiful vases. So it was settled that he should enter Horace's works on the art side, with a view to becoming, ultimately, art director. Horace gave him three pounds a week, in order that he might feel perfectly independent, and, to the same end, Sidney paid Horace seven-and-sixpence a week for board and lodging. But the change of life upset the youth's health again. After only two visits to the works he had a grave recurrence of the head-attacks, and he was solemnly exhorted not to apply himself too closely to business. He therefore took several half-holidays a week, and sometimes a whole one. And even when he put in one

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of his full days he would arrive at the works three hours after Horace, and restore the balance by leaving an hour earlier. The entire town watched over him as a mother watches over a son. The notion that he was not *quite* right in the pate gradually died away, and everybody was thankful for that, though it was feared an untimely grave might be his portion.

III

She was a nice girl: the nicest girl that Horace had ever met with, because her charming niceness included a faculty of being really serious about serious things – and yet she could be deliciously gay. In short, she was a revelation to Horace. And her name was Ella, and she had come one year to spend some weeks with Mrs Penkethman, the widowed headmistress of the Wesleyan Day School, who was her cousin. Mrs Penkethman and Ella had been holidaying together in France; their arrival in Bursley naturally coincided with the reopening of the school in August for the autumn term.

Now at this period Horace was rather lonely in his large house and garden; for Sidney, in pursuit of health, had gone off on a six weeks' cruise round Holland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, in one of those Atlantic liners which, translated like Enoch without dying, become in their old age 'steam-yachts', with fine names apt to lead to confusion with the private yacht of the Tsar of Russia. Horace had offered him the trip, and Horace was also paying his weekly salary as usual.

So Horace, who had always been friendly with Mrs Penkethman, grew now more than ever friendly with Mrs Penkethman. And Mrs Penkethman and Ella were inseparable. The few aristocrats left in Bursley in September remarked that Horace knew what he was about, as it was notorious that Ella had the most solid expectations. But as a matter of fact Horace did not know what he was about, and he never once thought of Ella's expectations. He was simply, as they say in Bursley, knocked silly by Ella. He honestly imagined her to be the wonderfullest woman on the earth's surface, with her dark eyes and her expressive sympathetic gestures, and her alterations of seriousness

and gaiety. It astounded him that a girl of twenty-one could have thought so deeply upon life as she had. The inexplicable thing was that she looked up to *him*. She evidently admired *him*. He wanted to tell her that she was quite wrong about him, much too kind in her estimate of him – that really he was a very ordinary man indeed. But another instinct prevented him from thus undeceiving her.

And one Saturday afternoon, the season being late September, Horace actually got those two women up to tea in his house and garden. He had not dared to dream of such bliss. He had hesitated long before asking them to come, and in asking them he had blushed and stammered: the invitation had seemed to him to savour of audacity. But, bless you! they had accepted with apparent ecstasy. They gave him to think that they had genuinely wanted to come. And they came extra-specially dressed – visions, lilies of the field. And as the day was quite warm, tea was served in the garden, and everybody admired the view; and there was no restraint, no awkwardness. In particular Ella talked with an ease and a distinction that enchanted Horace, and almost made him talk with ease and distinction too. He said to himself that, seeing he had only known her a month, he was getting on amazingly. He said to himself that his good luck passed belief.

Then there was a sound of cab-wheels on the other side of the garden-wall, and presently Horace heard the housekeeper complimenting Sidney on his good looks, and Sidney asking the housekeeper to lend him three shillings to pay the cabman. The golden youth had returned without the slightest warning from his cruise. The tea trio, at the lower end of the garden, saw him standing in the porch, tanned, curly, graceful, and young. Horace half rose, and then sat down again. Ella stared hard.

‘That must be your brother,’ she said.

‘Yes, that’s Sid,’ Horace answered; and then, calling out loudly: ‘Come down here, Sid, and tell them to bring another cup and saucer.’

‘Right you are, old man,’ Sidney shouted. ‘You see I’m back. What! Mrs Penkethman, is that you?’ He came down the central path of the garden like a Narcissus.

'He *does* look delicate,' said Ella under her breath to Horace. Tears came to her eyes.

Naturally Ella knew all about Sidney. She enjoyed the entire confidence of Mrs Penkethman, and what Mrs Penkethman didn't know of the private history of the upper classes in Bursley did not amount to very much.

These were nearly the last words that Ella spoke to Horace that afternoon. The introduction was made, and Sidney slipped into the party as comfortably as he slipped into everything, like a candle slipping into a socket. But nevertheless Ella talked no more. She just stared at Sidney, and listened to him. Horace was proud that Sidney had made such an impression on her; he was glad that she showed no aversion to Sidney, because, in the event of Horace's marriage, where would Sidney live, if not with Horace and Horace's wife? Still, he could have wished that Ella would continue to display her conversational powers.

Presently, Sidney lighted a cigarette. He was of those young men whose delicate mouths seem to have been fashioned for the nice conduct of a cigarette. And he had a way of blowing out the smoke that secretly ravished every feminine beholder. Horace still held to his boyhood's principles; but he envied Sidney a little.

At the conclusion of the festivity these two women naturally could not be permitted to walk home alone. And, naturally, also, the four could not walk abreast on the narrow pavements. Horace went first with Mrs Penkethman. He was mad with anxiety to appropriate Ella, but he dared not. It would not have been quite correct; it would have been, as they say in Bursley, too thick. Besides, there was the question of age. Horace was over thirty, and Mrs Penkethman was also – over thirty; whereas Sidney was twenty-one, and so was Ella. Hence Sidney walked behind with Ella, and the procession started in silence. Horace did not look round too often – that would not have been quite proper – but whenever he did look round the other couple had lagged farther and farther behind, and Ella seemed perfectly to have recovered her speech. At length he looked round, and lo! they had not turned the last corner; and they arrived at