



Penguin Modern Classics

# Arnold Bennett

## The Grand Babylon Hotel





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*Penguin Modern Classics*

## ARNOLD BENNETT

### CLAYHANGER

Arnold Bennett's careful evocation of a boy growing to manhood during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with its superb portrait of an autocratic father, stands on a literary level with *The Old Wives' Tale*. Set, like its successful predecessor, in the Five Towns, *Clayhanger* was destined to be the first novel in a trilogy.

Of the book and its hero Walter Allen has written in *The English Novel*: 'He is one of the most attractive heroes in twentieth-century fiction.' Bennett, who believed inordinately in the 'interestingness' of ordinary things and ordinary people, was never more successful in revealing the 'interest-in-ness' of an apparently ordinary man than in Edwin Clayhanger.

### THE GRIM SMILE OF THE FIVE TOWNS

In the short stories which make up *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, Arnold Bennett caught some of the manner of Maupassant, one of the French writers on whom he modelled his writing. The redolent tale of the coffin and the cheese, 'In a New Bottle', and 'The Silent Brothers' (who have not addressed one another for ten years) possess the true ring.

The pride, pretensions and provincial snobbery of the Potteries are handled by Arnold Bennett with amused tolerance. Most of his stories, like the four linked adventures of Vera Cheswardine, set the home life of middle-class manufacturers of earthenware and porcelain against a 'singular scenery of coaldust, potsherds, flame and steam'. But Bennett never ignores the less successful members of families in a region where 'clogs to clogs is only three generations'.

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*and*

### THE GOLDEN BOWL

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THE GRAND BABYLON HOTEL

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 be. 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.



# THE GRAND BABYLON HOTEL

*A Fantasia on Modern Themes*

ARNOLD BENNETT



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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN Arnold Bennett was a boy in the Potteries, two of his favourite authors were Eugène Sue, who wrote *The Mysteries of Paris*, and Ouida, who pictured in some of her books the richly coloured doings of an imaginary high society. These works, for Bennett, were the equivalent of another boy's 'penny dreadfuls'; and if the term had been known in the early eighteen-eighties they would have been described as 'escapes' from the humdrum of the Five Towns.

They were not escapes; they answered a sedate boy's need for sweets or spices. Arnold Bennett liked sweets. There is a story that when on one occasion he was dining with Hugh Walpole the host had provided no pudding. Bennett said 'I must have my sweet'; and calmly proceeded with the privilege of an old friend to leave Walpole's flat, walk along to the Ritz or the Royal Thames Yacht Club, and have one. He then, in complete good humour, resumed his place at Walpole's table. In the same way, when he had written a grave book, he liked to follow it with what he called 'a lark'.

Long after he had left the Potteries at the age of twenty-one, and when he had for some time consorted with various young painters and musicians, he discovered with surprise that his friends expected him to make a reputation as a writer. 'Their belief in what I could do,' he wrote, 'kept me awake at nights.' It had the effect of causing him to begin a very serious novel indeed.

It was published, when he was thirty, under the title of *A Man from the North*; and as chance and influence by that time had made him first assistant editor and then editor of a weekly journal called *Woman*, he found himself committed to a literary career. Part of his work for *Woman* involved the purchase of stories for the paper; and as was common at that time he derived them from a great newspaper syndicate. The syndicate bought all rights from the authors; leased serial rights to editors all over

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the world; and in time sold the book rights to publishers. In this way such then famous popular novelists as S. Baring-Gould, William le Queux, and L. T. Meade made a regular living; and were sometimes inconvenienced when what they had forgotten having written turned up among a season's publications.

One day Bennett felt extremely dissatisfied with what was offered to him by this syndicate. Having come from the Potteries, he was given to sudden romantic ideas, and to abrupt and humorous boasts, all of which came from the heart. Turning dissatisfaction in his mind, therefore, he received from his romantic sense the notion that he, and no other, could do something better. He had published, besides *A Man from the North*, two other books, *Journalism for Women* and a small collection of what he called *Polite Farces*; he had reached the age of thirty; and he was instinctively seeking a new outlet for a lively talent. When next the syndicate's representative called upon him, accordingly, he said (no doubt stammering, as was incurably his habit from childhood): 'Why should all the buying be on one side? You know I'm an author.'

The syndicate's representative was uncooperative. He replied that he never bought serials from editors. Evidently, thought Bennett, this situation had arisen before; and it must be handled as only a man from the north could handle it. He did not insist. He remarked that there were other syndicates, that he was writing a serial, and that the serial would be a good one. He then gave the representative an order for other men's serials.

This, in a sense, was the first chapter in a long story. The truth was that Bennett had no plan for his serial. It was his way, as long as he lived, to make bold and boyish assertions of this kind; and he was forced by self-respect, having made them, to keep his promises. Having heard the boasts, men of smaller genius believed that he lived according to calculation, whereas he was as simple as that 'simple soul' Arthur Kipps. If you read *The Card*, which was about a fellow-townsmen, H. K. Hales, and bear in mind that everything in that book is intended to be fantastic, you will understand how typical a lad from the Potteries Arnold Bennett was, and how he united to the strictest integrity an impulsive

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with which Dumas handled a dazzlingly tall story. And soon he was fired by a splendid idea.

It was so with this first serial, which was called *For Love and Life*. He had told the syndicate's representative that it was being written; therefore it must be written. He called upon his brain to invent a story; and as he had noticed, in buying serials, that most of them lacked any powerful central theme, he determined that what he wrote must surpass all other serials by the grandeur of its invention. Memories of Ouida, of Wilkie Collins, of Eugène Sue crowded to his mind. He did not forget the aplomb with which Dumas handled a dazzlingly tall story. And soon he was fired by a splendid idea.

*For Love and Life* was written in twenty-four half-days; and the copyright was sold for seventy-five pounds. When the book was finished, Arnold Bennett saw all the possibilities he had missed through ignorance and inexperience. I am quite sure he told nobody about the misses; instead, he resolved, having taken that particular tide, that his next serial should be 'absolutely sublime in those qualities that should characterize a sensational serial . . .

I imagined a serial decked with the profuse ornament of an Eastern princess, a serial at once grandiose and witty, at once modern and transcendental, a serial of which the interest should gradually close on the reader like a vice until it became intolerable. I saw the whole of London preoccupied with this serial instead of with cricket and politics. I heard the dandiacal City youths discussing in first-class compartments on the Underground what would happen next in it. I witnessed a riot in Fleet Street because I had, accidentally on purpose, delayed my copy for twenty-four hours. . . . I did not realize my dream, but I was inspired by it.

He was inspired by it. The plot which came to him was less fine, he thought, than the previous one; but it began 'with a scene quite unique in the annals of syndicates.' It was the scene – you will find it here in hardly more than a couple of pages – where Theodore Racksole orders an Angel Kiss at the Grand Babylon Hotel, and in spite of the insolence of Jules, head waiter at that fabulously select establishment, obtains it. What follows is



equally surprising, although it must be pointed out at once that when *The Grand Babylon Hotel* was written Edgar Wallace was still a journalist, and may easily have read and forgotten *The Grand Babylon Hotel* before, five years after its serialization, he invented *The Four Just Men*. Edgar Wallace had the cool, steady inventiveness of an instinctive gambler: to Arnold Bennett invention was a lark.

'I tried,' said he, 'to feel as much like Dumas *père* as I could. But when I had done I felt, physically, rather more like the fragile Shelley or some wan curate than Dumas.' He wrote the fifteen instalments in fifteen days. He sold the story for a hundred pounds. The syndicate sold first serial rights in it to *The Golden Penny*, which advertised tumultuously week after week on 800 railway stations and lavished magnificent illustrations upon every instalment. The paper described *The Grand Babylon Hotel* as the most original, amusing, and thrilling serial written in a decade, and the best thing of the sort since *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*. Bennett's modest, astounded comment, made in his Journal for 18 January 1901, was 'Fancy writing a story as good as *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*!'

*The Grand Babylon Hotel* was sold as a book to Messrs Chatto & Windus, who published it, with comparable enthusiasm, in the same year as Bennett's extremely ambitious serious novel, *Anna of the Five Towns*. They also bought, from the same syndicate, not only *For Love and Life*, which was re-titled *The Ghost*, but his other serials and 'fantasias'; and the author was afterwards to regret the impossibility of preventing their publication in book form. He did not regret *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, which until he wrote *The Old Wives' Tale* was the most famous of his works.

It led to a general assumption among superior persons that he was seriously enraptured by the splendours of luxury hotels. He was called a vulgarian whose eye was perpetually upon money and meretricious display. But readers of *The Grand Babylon Hotel* will observe that, in accordance with the practice of the greatest writers, Bennett refrained from particularizing the ornaments of his scene: he merely said they were magnificent. What interested him were the wonders of an immense micro-

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cosm. Theodore Racksole's discovery of the laundry system, of the wine cellars, of the kitchens testifies to this interest. 'It's strange how facts like those,' remarks a character in the book, 'unimportant in themselves, appeal to the imagination.' They appealed to Bennett's imagination. Just as he was struck one day in the Forest of Fontainebleau by a thought of the myriads of insects and small animals which must be all around him, so the sense of hundreds of human lives grouped about and dominated by a single industry stirred him deeply. He never escaped from it.

As for the sensational story of what Theodore Racksole discovered after buying the Grand Babylon as a multi-millionaire's whim, it is before you. The book is more than half a century old; the discomfitures of the leading actors, and their escapes from strange predicaments, were conditioned by the need to make each instalment conclude with a thrill; more sophisticated romances have accustomed us to themes and discussions of greater complexity. But the book has already had a lengthy life; and if a comparison with *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* no longer excites us, as it did the author, that is because *The Grand Babylon Hotel* set a new standard for such books. It should be read as what Arnold Bennett intended it to be, a lark.

1953

FRANK SWINNERTON



## Chapter One

### THE MILLIONAIRE AND THE WAITER

‘YES, sir?’

Jules, the celebrated head waiter of the Grand Babylon, was bending formally towards the alert, middle-aged man who had just entered the smoking-room and dropped into a basket-chair in the corner by the conservatory. It was 7.45 on a particularly sultry June night, and dinner was about to be served at the Grand Babylon. Men of all sizes, ages, and nationalities, but every one alike arrayed in faultless evening dress, were dotted about the large, dim apartment. A faint odour of flowers came from the conservatory, and the tinkle of a fountain. The waiters, commanded by Jules, moved softly across the thick Oriental rugs, balancing their trays with the dexterity of jugglers, and receiving and executing orders with that air of profound importance of which only really first-class waiters have the secret. The atmosphere was an atmosphere of serenity and repose, characteristic of the Grand Babylon. It seemed impossible that anything could occur to mar the peaceful, aristocratic monotony of existence in that perfectly-managed establishment. Yet on that night was to happen the mightiest upheaval that the Grand Babylon had ever known.

‘Yes, sir?’ repeated Jules, and this time there was a shade of august disapproval in his voice: it was not usual for him to have to address a customer twice.

‘Oh!’ said the alert, middle-aged man, looking up at length. Beautifully ignorant of the identity of the great Jules, he allowed his grey eyes to twinkle as he caught sight of the expression on the waiter’s face. ‘Bring me an Angel Kiss.’

‘Pardon, sir?’

‘Bring me an Angel Kiss, and be good enough to lose no time.’

‘If it’s an American drink, I fear we don’t keep it, sir.’ The voice of Jules fell icily distinct, and several men glanced round uneasily, as if to deprecate the slightest disturbance of their calm.