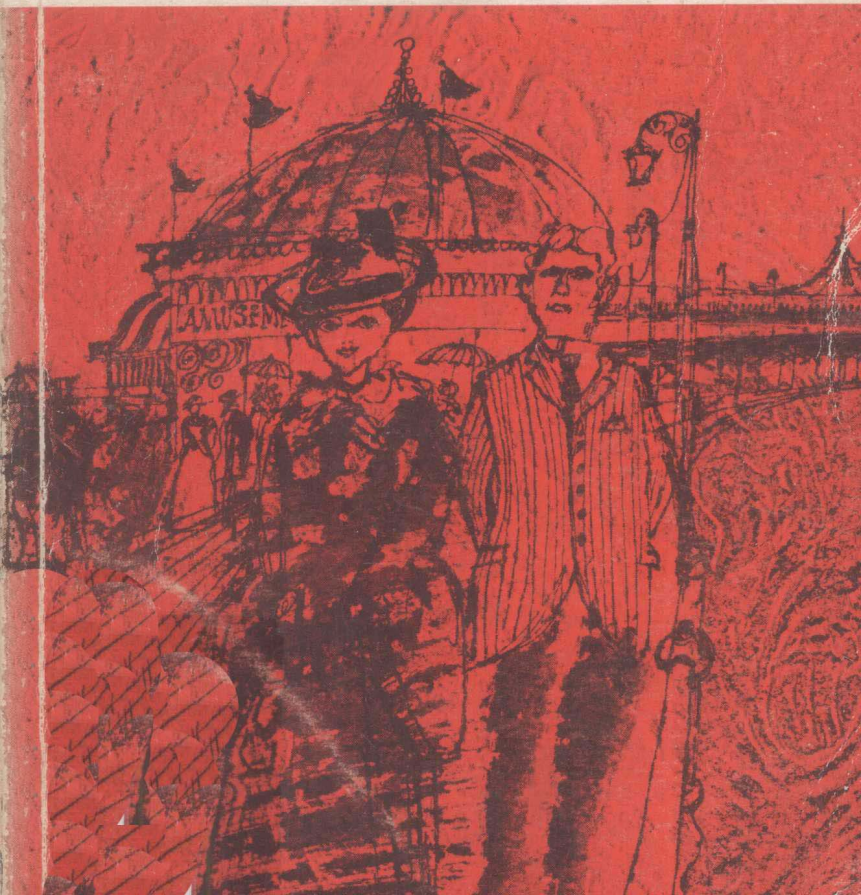


The Bridge Series

The Card

Arnold Bennett

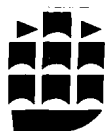


THE CARD

by
ARNOLD BENNETT

Abridged and simplified by
R.H. Durham

Illustrated by
~~Geoffrey Whittam~~



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The Bridge Series

THE CARD

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NOTE ON THE BOOK

ARNOLD BENNETT called this book *The Card—A Story of Adventure in the Five Towns*. The five towns in the story are named Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, Longshaw and Turnhill. On a map of England you will see, in Staffordshire, five towns called Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Longton and Tunstall. Arnold Bennett was born near Hanley. So this story, like several other of Arnold Bennett's books, is set in a district and among people whom he knew very well.

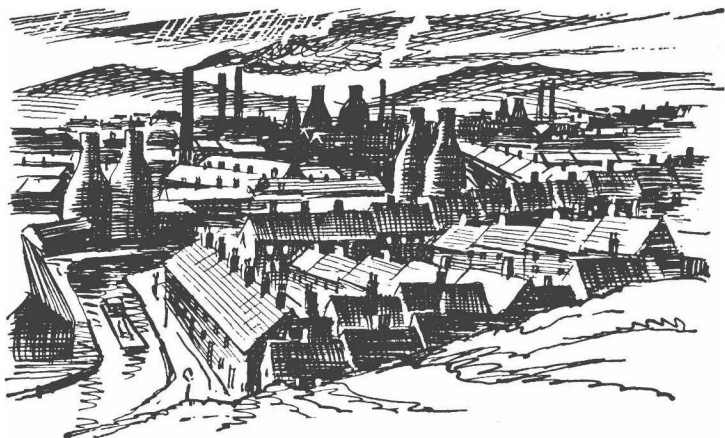
The Card was first published in 1911 and is the story of a man who was born, as Arnold Bennett himself was, in 1867. That is now over ninety years ago, and while reading the story you should remember that it takes place in an England very different from the England of to-day, and in a world lacking many of our modern inventions.

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CHAPTER I
THE DANCE

I



EDWARD HENRY MACHIN first saw the smoke on the 27th May, 1867, in Brougham Street, Bursley, the most ancient of the Five Towns. Brougham Street runs down from St. Luke's Square straight into the Shropshire Union Canal, and consists partly of earthenware factories and partly of cottages whose highest rent is four-and-six a week. In such surroundings was an extraordinary man born. He was the only anxiety of a widowed mother, who gained her living and his by sewing and washing clothes in ladies' own houses. Mrs. Machin was a somewhat gloomy woman; thin, with a tongue! But I liked

her. She saved a certain amount of time every day by addressing her son as Denry, instead of Edward Henry.

Not intellectual, not industrious, Denry would have worked in a factory had he not at the age of twelve won a scholarship from the Elementary School to the Secondary School. He probably owed his triumph to luck rather than learning, but, whatever the reason for his success, he did win a scholarship. This dazzling feat seemed to influence not only Denry's career but also his character. He gradually came to believe that he had won the scholarship by genuine merit, and that he was a remarkable boy and destined to great ends. His new companions, whose mothers employed Denry's mother, also believed that he was a remarkable boy; but they did not forget, in their gentlemanly way, to call him "washer-woman." Happily Denry did not mind.

He had a thick skin,¹ and fair hair and bright eyes and broad shoulders, and the gaiety of his disposition developed daily. He did not shine at the school; he failed to fulfil the rosy promise of the scholarship; but he was not stupider than the majority and his opinion of himself, having once risen, remained steady. It was impossible that he should work in clay with his hands.

II

When he was sixteen Denry Machin left school to be clerk to Mr. Duncalf. (Mr. Duncalf was the Town Clerk of Bursley, and a solicitor). And for several years he really thought that he had nothing further to hope for. Then he met the Countess.

When the Countess married the Earl of Chell, she also married about twenty thousand acres in England, about a fifth of Scotland, a house in London, seven country houses (includ-

¹ He had a thick skin—he was not hurt by insults.

ing Sneyd), a steamboat, and five hundred thousand pounds' worth of shares in the Midland Railway. And she was young and pretty. All this did not satisfy her. She was ambitious! She wanted to be taken seriously. She wanted to enter into the life of the people. She saw in the quarter of a million souls that constitute the Five Towns a means to her end. And she determined to be identified with all that was most serious in the social progress of the Five Towns. Hence some fifteen thousand pounds were spent in redecorating Sneyd Hall, which lies on the edge of the Five Towns, and the Earl and Countess passed four months of the year there. Hence the Earl, a mild, quiet man, when invited by the Town Council to be the ornamental Mayor of Bursley, accepted the invitation. And hence, a little later, the Mayoress let it be known that she meant to give a municipal ball. The news of the ball thrilled Bursley more than anything had thrilled Bursley before. Nevertheless, balls had been offered by previous mayoresses. One can only suppose that in Bursley there remains a peculiar respect for land, railway shares, steamboats, and ancient families.

But everybody could not be asked to the ball, because not more than two hundred people could dance in the Town Hall. There were nearly thirty-five thousand inhabitants in Bursley, of whom quite two thousand "counted," even though they did not dance.

III

Three weeks and three days before the ball Denry Machin was seated one Monday alone in Mr. Duncalf's private offices in Duck Square (where he carried on his practice as a solicitor), when in stepped a tall and pretty young woman, dressed very smartly in dark green. The young woman said "Good morning!" in a very friendly style. She had a shrill voice and an efficient smile.

"Good morning, madam," said Denry.

"Mr. Duncalf in?" asked the young woman brightly.

"No, madam; he's across at the Town Hall," said Denry.

"You might just give him this list," she said. She had come to the desk; their elbows touched. "Of course, I'm relying on him for the other lists, and I expect all the invitations to be out on Wednesday. Good morning."

She was gone. He sprang to the smoky window. Outside, in the snow, were a carriage, twin horses, and twin men in yellow. She flashed across the footpath, and vanished; the door of the carriage banged, one of the twins in yellow leaped up to his brother, and the whole affair dashed dangerously away. The face of the leaping twin was familiar to Denry. The man had, indeed, once lived in Brougham Street, being known to the street as Jock, and his mother had for long years been a friend of Mrs. Machin's.

It was the first time Denry had seen the Countess, except at a distance. Certainly she was finer even than her photographs. Entirely different from what one would have expected! So easy to talk to! (Yet what had he said to her? Nothing—and everything).

He nodded his head and murmured, "She's the finest woman that ever came into this town."

The truth was that she surpassed his dreams of womanhood. At two o'clock she had been a name to him. At five minutes past two he was in love with her.

It was while looking at her list of invitations to the ball that he first conceived the fantastic scheme of attending the ball himself. Mr. Duncalf was managing the machinery of the ball for the Countess. He had prepared a little list of his own of people who ought to be invited. Several aldermen had been requested to do the same. There were thus about half-a-dozen lists to be combined into one. Denry did the combining. Nothing was easier than to put the name of E. H. Machin

where it would not be easily noticed towards the centre of the list! Nothing was easier than to lose the original lists. On Wednesday Denry received a lovely invitation card, stating that the Countess desired the pleasure of his company at the ball; and on Thursday his name was ticked off as one who had accepted.

IV

He had never been to a dance. He had no dress-suit, and no notion of dancing. For three days he hesitated, and then secretly trembling, he slipped into Shillitoe's the young tailor who had recently set up.

"I want a dress-suit," he said.

Shillitoe, who knew that Denry only earned eighteen shillings a week, replied that he had already taken more orders than he could manage.

"So you're going to the ball, are you?" said Shillitoe, trying to sound superior, but, in fact, slightly impressed.

"Yes," said Denry; "are you?"

Shillitoe looked surprised and then shook his head. "No time for balls," said he.

"I can get you an invitation, if you like," said Denry, glancing at the door.

To cut a shameful story short, in a week Denry was being tried on. Shillitoe allowed him two years' credit.

The prospect of the ball gave immense encouragement to the study of the art of dancing in Bursley, and so put quite a nice sum of money into the pocket of Miss Earp, a young mistress in that art. She was the daughter of a furniture dealer with a passion for the Bankruptcy Court. Miss Earp's evening classes were attended by Denry, but none of his money went into her pocket. She was compensated by an expression of the Countess's desire for the pleasure of her company at the ball.

The Countess had aroused Denry's interest in women as a sex; Ruth Earp quickened the interest. She was plain, but she was only twenty four, and very graceful on her feet. At the final lesson he inquired if she would give him the first waltz at the ball. She paused, then said yes.

V

The Countess was late; some trouble with a horse. Denry learned this as soon as he emerged from the gentlemen's cloak-room into the broad corridor of the Town Hall. Many important townspeople were chatting in the corridor—the innumerable Swetnam family, the Stanways, the great Etches, the Fearnsses. Of course everybody knew him for Duncalf's clerk and the son of the washer-woman; but universal white gloves constitute a democracy, and Shillitoe could put more style into a suit than any other tailor in the Five Towns.

"How do?" the eldest of the Swetnam boys nodded carelessly.

"How do, Swetnam?" said Denry, with equal carelessness.

The thing was accomplished! From now on he was the peer of no matter whom.

He passed up the double staircase into the grand hall. An orchestra was on the platform. The walls were decorated with flowers. The thrill of being magnificent seized him, and he was filled with a vast desire to be truly magnificent himself. He looked about for Ruth Earp, but she was invisible. Then he went downstairs again, idly; gorgeously pretending that he spent six evenings a week in ascending and descending huge staircases, appropriately dressed.

There was a stir in the corridor, and the Countess was announced to be near. Everybody was grouped round the main door. And then the Countess appeared, coming from the narrow gloom of her black carriage like a magic vision.

Aldermen received her and she disappeared upstairs in a cloud of shrill apologies and trailing aldermen. She seemed to have greeted everybody except Denry. He waited, hesitating, and then he saw a being in a long yellow overcoat and a shiny high hat. Their eyes met. Denry had to decide instantly. He decided.

"Hello, Jock!" he said.

"Hello, Denry!" said the other, pleased.

"What's been happening?" Denry inquired, friendly.

Then Jock told him about the misbehaviour of one of the Countess's horses.

He went upstairs again, and met Ruth Earp coming down. She was glorious in white. She looked the very equal of the Countess, at a little distance, plain though her features were.

"What about that waltz?" Denry began.

"That waltz is nearly over," said Ruth Earp, with chilliness. "I suppose you've been staring at the Countess with all the other men."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "I didn't know the waltz was——"

"Well, why didn't you look at your programme?"

"Haven't got one," he said simply.

He had omitted to take a programme. *Uncivilized fool!*

"Better get one," she said cuttingly, somewhat in her *rôle* of dancing mistress.

"Can't we finish the waltz?" he suggested, miserably.

"No!" she said, and continued her solitary way downwards.

She was hurt. He tried to think of something to say that was equal to the situation, and equal to the style of his suit. But he could not. In a moment he heard her, below him, greeting some male acquaintance in the most friendly way.

Yet, if Denry had not committed a wicked crime for her, she could never have come to the dance at all!

He got a programme, and with terror gripping his heart he

asked various young and middle-aged women whom he knew by sight and by name for a dance. (Ruth had taught him how to ask). Not one of them had a dance left. Several looked at him as much as to say: "You must be a goose to suppose that my programme is not filled up in the twinkling of my eye!"

Then he joined a group of despisers of dancing near the main door. Harold Etches was there, the wealthiest manufacturer of his years (barely twenty-four) in the Five Towns. Also Shillitoe, cause of another of Denry's wicked crimes. The group was quiet and critical.

The group observed that the Countess was not dancing. She stood smiling, surrounded by aldermen. Possibly she was getting her breath; possibly nobody had had the courage to ask her.

"Why don't some of those aldermen ask her?" Denry burst out. He had hitherto said nothing in the group, and he felt that he must be a man with the rest of them.

"Well, *you* go and do it. It's a free country," said Shillitoe.

"So I would for two pins!" said Denry.

Harold Etches glanced at him, apparently annoyed by his presence there. Harold Etches was determined to put an end to *him*.

"I'll bet you a fiver you don't," said Etches scornfully.

"I'll take you," said Denry, very quickly, and very quickly walked off.

VI

"She can't eat me. She can't eat me!"

This was what he said to himself as he crossed the floor. If he had not started at once, if his legs had not started of themselves, he would never have started. But started he was, like a piece of clockwork that could not be stopped! In the grand crises of his life something not himself, something more power-



Thus they waltzed together

ful than himself, jumped up in him and forced him to do things. Now for the first time he seemed to understand what had occurred within him in previous crises.

In a second—so it appeared—he had reached the Countess. Just behind her was his employer, Mr. Duncalf, whom Denry had not previously noticed there. Denry regretted this, for he had never mentioned to Mr. Duncalf that he was coming to the ball, and he feared Mr. Duncalf.

“Could I have this dance with you?” he demanded without ceremony, but smiling and showing his teeth.

“I’ve won that fiver, Mr. Harold Etches,” he said to himself.

The mouths of aldermen opened. Mr. Duncalf jumped with surprise.

“It’s nearly over, isn’t it?” said the Countess, still efficiently smiling. She did not recognize Denry. In that suit he might have been a Foreign Office official.

“Oh! that doesn’t matter, I’m sure,” said Denry.

She yielded, and he took the heavenly creature in his arms. It was her business that evening to be universally and inclusively polite. She could not have begun with a refusal. A refusal might have dried up all other invitations completely. Besides, she saw that the aldermen wanted a lead. Besides, she was young, though a countess, and adored dancing.

Thus they waltzed together, while the flower of Bursley’s chivalry gazed in wonder. The Countess’s fan, depending from her arm, knocked against Denry’s suit in a rather confusing fashion, which withdrew his attention from his feet. He laid hold of it carefully between two unemployed fingers. After that he managed fairly well. And then the dance ended, exactly when Denry had begun to appreciate the astounding spectacle of himself enclasping the Countess.

The Countess had soon perceived that he was the merest boy.