ARNOLD BENNETT

HILDA LESSWAYS

ROMANCE CLASSIC

Arnold Bennett

Hilda Lessways (Romance Classic)

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Travis Norton

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Introduction

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At its core, Hilda Lessways dramatizes a young woman’s uncompromising bid for self-direction against the compressing forces of family obligation, social surveillance, and an industrious town’s fixed routines, tracing how desire, prudence, and circumstance press upon one another until every hope must be tested not in grand gestures but in ordinary rooms, on workaday streets, and across the hesitations of conversation, and it asks, with unsparing clarity yet humane patience, how far a person may advance toward freedom, affection, and self-respect without surrendering the threads of loyalty and place that quietly hold a life together.

Arnold Bennett’s Hilda Lessways is a realist novel of formation set in the Five Towns, his enduring fictional version of the pottery-dominated district of Staffordshire in the English Midlands. First published in 1911 as the second installment of the Clayhanger trilogy, it returns to the late nineteenth-century provincial world that Bennett rendered with exact social detail and psychological steadiness. The book belongs to the tradition of the social novel and the coming-of-age narrative, while also incorporating the delicate cadence of a romance of manners. Its canvas is compact but intricate: households, offices, streets, and chapels shaped by industry, thrift, and local memory.

At the center stands Hilda, a perceptive young woman determined to move beyond the paths others have plotted for her, even as obligations close to home exert a steady pull. The novel follows the first decisive stretches of her adulthood: the tentative experiments in independence, the

negotiations around work and duty, and the encounters that awaken both confidence and caution. Bennett stages these turns without melodrama, letting events accrue in quiet sequences that gather force. The reading experience is immersive and measured, attentive to small textures of place and feeling, yet quietly suspenseful as choices narrow and consequences come into view.

Bennett’s narrative voice works through close third-person observation, frequently aligning the storytelling with Hilda’s perceptions while maintaining the author’s calm, lucid distance. Scenes unfold with patient exactness: furniture, street corners, ledger books, and gestures are weighed not as clutter but as the material terms of life, revealing pressures that characters may only half articulate. The tone is unsentimental yet sympathetic, alert to vanity and self-deception, but generous to hesitation and fear. Stylistically, the book favors gradual intensification over shocks, building its drama through the logic of daily routines, the unease of delayed decisions, and the sudden clarity of self-recognition.

Several themes quietly govern Hilda Lessways. The most immediate is personal agency under constraint: how education, money, and reputation shape what a young woman can choose and what she must endure. Bennett also tracks the ethics of ambition, scrutinizing the thin line between self-respect and self-absorption. The industrial town is not mere backdrop but an active force, fixing habits of thrift, diligence, and suspicion that influence sentiment as surely as they determine wages. Time, too, exerts pressure, as small postponements alter futures. Across these strands lies a persistent question about truthfulness—to others and to oneself—when candor risks social or emotional cost.

For contemporary readers, the novel’s relevance lies not only in its historical portrait but in its clear-eyed mapping of

choices constrained by structures larger than any individual. Debates over work and care, mobility and belonging, and the costs of self-improvement echo through Hilda’s calculations. Bennett’s precision about money, housing, and reputation anticipates modern discussions of precarity and visibility. The book does not preach reforms; it dramatizes consequences, inviting readers to consider how institutions and intimacies overlap. In doing so, it offers a humane counterweight to simplistic narratives of empowerment, honoring the courage of incremental change and the dignity of ordinary resolve.

Approached on its own or as the middle movement of the Clayhanger trilogy, Hilda Lessways stands as one of Bennett’s most concentrated studies of character under pressure. It rewards patient attention with the satisfactions of exact craft: scenes that breathe, motivations tested against material circumstances, and a narrative arc that respects uncertainty while steadily clarifying a life. Readers new to the Five Towns will find an accessible entry point; those returning will recognize how shifting perspective deepens the world. Above all, the novel offers companionship in seriousness, treating aspiration and error with equal fairness and allowing growth to emerge without fanfare.

Synopsis

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Hilda Lessways (1911) by Arnold Bennett is the second novel in his Clayhanger trilogy, a companion to Clayhanger that reanimates events through Hilda's point of view. Set chiefly in the industrial Five Towns of Staffordshire, the book follows a young woman's quest for self-direction amid family duty and local convention. Bennett blends close psychological observation with rich social detail, tracing how private impulses collide with the rhythms of provincial life. Without retracing the earlier story, this installment opens a new vantage, presenting Hilda not as a puzzle to others but as an interpreter of her own motives, hesitations, and emerging ambitions.

The narrative begins with Hilda at home, sharing a constrained domestic routine with her mother. Intelligent, restless, and alert to the world beyond her street, she chafes against expectations that measure a woman's worth by quiet usefulness. Bennett shows how reading, conversation, and small errands open portals to a larger horizon. Hilda's wish to work for herself is neither rebellion nor fashion; it feels like necessity. The first chapters sketch the subtleties of their household—affection, secrecy, thrift—and establish the social network of neighbors, tradesmen, and acquaintances whose judgments can either confine or propel a young woman's prospects.

Seeking independence, Hilda moves toward practical employment, cultivating clerical skills that promise a wage and a measure of privacy of mind. Her initiation into office life is tentative: she learns the tempo of correspondence, the authority of ledgers, and the invisible hierarchies that

govern desks and doorways. Bennett details the compromises required to be both dutiful daughter and reliable worker, and he traces how small choices—accepting an errand, postponing a visit, taking on a task beyond her remit—quietly reshape her path. Work offers exhilaration and risk, especially when competence draws notice that blurs professional propriety with personal interest.

Into this incremental progress enters a magnetic figure from the business world whose energy and schemes promise swifter advancement. The encounter flatters Hilda's capability while testing her ideals. Bennett keeps the focus on Hilda's inward debate: where does prudent calculation end and capitulation begin? As personal feeling colors professional opportunity, she confronts the practicalities of contracts, reputation, and trust. The relationship intensifies her education in power—how it is offered, how it is withheld, and how a young woman might grasp or refuse it without losing herself. Ambition, sympathy, and caution pull her in different directions.

The story broadens in scope as Hilda moves among new rooms and neighborhoods, negotiating boarding arrangements, office corridors, and drawing rooms where manners and silence carry information. Money and respectability become intertwined problems; obligations multiply faster than solutions. Bennett's realism emphasizes process over shock: a ledger entry, a casual remark, or a late-arriving letter can alter the weight of a day. Hilda learns to read the town's atmosphere—its gossip, its pauses—as keenly as any document. Her resourcefulness grows, but so does the cost of each decision, binding her more tightly to consequences she only partly chose.

For readers of Clayhanger, this novel reframes familiar milestones from a different angle, giving context to fleeting

impressions and misunderstood motives. Hilda’s path occasionally intersects with the Clayhanger circle, yet the emphasis remains on what she sees, misreads, or withholds, not on retelling public scenes. Bennett’s structural design—counterpointing one life with another—suggests how parallel experiences can converge without fully meeting. By staying close to Hilda’s consciousness, the book reveals how even decisive moments are lived as a sequence of hesitations, practicalities, and afterthoughts rather than as tidy turning points.

Hilda Lessways endures as a subtle study of female agency in an early-twentieth-century provincial world, scrutinizing the bargain between independence and belonging. Bennett’s patient attention to economic detail, social nuance, and interior conflict creates a portrait of growth that resists melodrama. Without relying on sensational reversals, the novel shows how character is formed in the pressure of everyday choices. As the trilogy’s middle movement, it deepens the larger design, demonstrating how two perspectives can revise a single story. Its abiding resonance lies in the clarity and compassion with which it understands the costs—and rewards—of choosing one’s own life.

Historical Context

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Hilda Lessways (1911), the second novel in Arnold Bennett's Clayhanger trilogy, is set in the industrial "Five Towns," his fictional version of the Staffordshire Potteries in England's Midlands. The action unfolds largely in the late Victorian era and into the early twentieth century, when pot-banks, Nonconformist chapels, school boards, and small offices shaped everyday life. The region's dense cluster of ceramic works, rows of terraced housing, and tight municipal jurisdictions provided a distinctive provincial environment. Bennett, born in Hanley in 1867, drew directly on this locale, rendering its institutions and rhythms with documentary precision while following a young woman's efforts to define a career and selfhood.

The Potteries epitomized Britain's late nineteenth-century industrial landscape: hundreds of bottle-shaped kilns, intense shift work, and pervasive smoke. The trade's hazards were public knowledge—lead glazing could cause poisoning, and dust diseases afflicted workers—prompting incremental regulation. Special Rules for potteries were issued by the Home Office in the 1890s and revised in the early 1900s to limit exposure and improve ventilation, while Factory and Workshop Acts tightened inspections. Such conditions framed social expectations, wages, and hours, and they informed civic campaigns for cleaner air. Bennett's depiction of streets darkened by firing days and lives timed to kilns reflects the era's material pressures without romantic gloss.

Local governance was being refashioned as Hilda's world takes shape. The Local Government Act 1888 created

elected county councils, and the 1894 Act reorganized urban and rural districts, expanding responsibilities for sanitation, roads, and lighting. Public Health Act enforcement normalized paved streets, sewers, and water supply in provincial towns. Mobility accelerated: railways linked the Midlands to Manchester, Birmingham, and London, and from 1899 the Potteries Electric Traction Company operated electric trams that bound the towns into a daily commuter network. These reforms and technologies transformed shop hours, leisure, and courtship patterns—background changes Bennett registers through routine details rather than public oratory.

Education reforms underpin the novel’s emphasis on self-improvement. The Elementary Education Act 1870 established elected school boards; the 1880 act made attendance compulsory to age ten; and in 1891 fees were abolished, widening access. The 1902 Education Act created local education authorities and expanded secondary provision, including for girls. Rising literacy fed provincial print culture—circulating libraries, reading rooms, and prize books from Sunday schools. For ambitious youths, examinations, shorthand, and bookkeeping offered routes into clerical work. Bennett, a former solicitor’s clerk and journalist, understood this ladder and situates his characters amid board schools, evening classes, and small offices where writing becomes practical employment.

The book’s focus on a young woman’s independence coincides with broader shifts in gender roles. By the 1880s and 1890s, the typewriter and expanding office work created new, though often poorly paid, clerical posts for women, alongside longstanding domestic service. The Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 enabled wives to control earnings and property, and public debate over the “New Woman” questioned conventional marriage

and education. Organized suffrage advanced: the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies formed in 1897, and the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903 pressed a militant case. Bennett registers these tensions through behavior, choices, and social scrutiny.

Print culture saturates the setting. After the stamp duty's abolition in 1855, cheap provincial newspapers flourished, and by the fin de siècle local weeklies and evening papers mixed municipal gossip, serialized fiction, and advertising. Small printers, stationers, and jobbing offices supplied tickets, handbills, and ledgers to shops and chapels. The office became a modern workplace where shorthand, typing, and correspondence set the tempo, and where female typists increasingly appeared. Libel law and press competition disciplined tone yet rewarded sensation. Bennett's knowledge of journalism lets him show how headlines, classifieds, and proof-sheets shape ambition and reputation without turning the novel into reportage.

Religion and class intersect strongly in the Potteries. Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist chapels provided worship, temperance activism, and social networks distinct from the Anglican establishment, and they aligned many townspeople with Liberal politics. Respectability—punctuality, thrift, and sober leisure—was a moral currency that could enable mobility from apprentice to clerk to proprietor. Economic cycles mattered: the "Long Depression" from the 1870s into the mid-1890s constrained wages and orders in ceramics, while later recoveries brought cautious optimism. Bennett maps these pressures onto domestic interiors, shopfronts, and municipal rooms, showing how civic pride and chapel discipline shape decisions about money, marriage, and work.

Published at the end of the Edwardian decade, Hilda Lessways belongs to a wave of English realism committed to provincial detail and social causation. Bennett admired Balzac and Maupassant, and he experiments with perspective across the trilogy, replaying episodes from different vantage points to test memory and reputation. The novel's attention to offices, chapels, tramlines, and bylaws offers a record of modernization while quietly criticizing the constraints imposed on women's employment and intimate choices. Its restraint—rarely staging national politics directly—captures how large movements filter into private lives, making the book both a portrait of the Potteries and a critique of its norms.

Hilda Lessways (Romance Classic)

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Book I
Her Start in Life

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Chapter 1
An Event in Mr. Skellorn's Life

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I

The Lessways household, consisting of Hilda and her widowed mother, was temporarily without a servant. Hilda hated domestic work, and because she hated it she often did it passionately and thoroughly. That afternoon, as she emerged from the kitchen, her dark, defiant face was full of grim satisfaction in the fact that she had left a kitchen polished and irreproachable, a kitchen without the slightest indication that it ever had been or ever would be used for preparing human nature's daily food; a show kitchen. Even the apron which she had worn was hung in concealment behind the scullery door. The lobby clock, which stood over six feet high and had to be wound up every night by hauling on a rope, was noisily getting ready to strike two. But for Mrs. Lessways' disorderly and undesired assistance, Hilda's task might have been finished a quarter of an hour earlier. She passed quietly up the stairs. When she was near the top, her mother's voice, at once querulous and amiable, came from the sitting-room:

"Where are you going to?"

There was a pause, dramatic for both of them, and in that minute pause the very life of the house seemed for an instant to be suspended, and then the waves of the hostile love that united these two women resumed their beating, and Hilda's lips hardened.

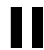
"Upstairs," she answered callously.

No reply from the sitting-room!

At two o’clock on the last Wednesday of every month, old Mr. Skellorn, employed by Mrs. Lessways to collect her cottage-rents, called with a statement of account, and cash in a linen bag. He was now due. During his previous visit Hilda had sought to instil some common sense into her mother on the subject of repairs, and there had ensued an altercation which had never been settled.

“If I stayed down, she wouldn’t like it,” Hilda complained fiercely within herself, “and if I keep away she doesn’t like that either! That’s mother all over!”

She went to her bedroom. And into the soft, controlled shutting of the door she put more exasperated vehemence than would have sufficed to bang it off its hinges.



At this date, late October in 1878, Hilda was within a few weeks of twenty-one. She was a woman, but she could not realize that she was a woman. She remembered that when she first went to school, at the age of eight, an assistant teacher aged nineteen had seemed to her to be unquestionably and absolutely a woman, had seemed to belong definitely to a previous generation. The years had passed, and Hilda was now older than that mature woman was then; and yet she could not feel adult, though her childhood gleamed dimly afar off, and though the intervening expanse of ten years stretched out like a hundred years, like eternity. She was in trouble; the trouble grew daily more and more tragic; and the trouble was that she wanted she knew not what. If her mother had said to her squarely, “Tell me what it is will make you a bit more contented, and you shall have it even if it kills me!” Hilda could only have answered with the fervour of despair, “I don’t know! I don’t know!”

Her mother was a creature contented enough. And why not—with a sufficient income, a comfortable home, and fair health? At the end of a day devoted partly to sheer vacuous idleness and partly to the monotonous simple machinery of physical existence—everlasting cookery, everlasting cleanliness, everlasting stitchery—her mother did not with a yearning sigh demand, “Must this sort of thing continue for ever, or will a new era dawn?” Not a bit! Mrs. Lessways went to bed in the placid expectancy of a very similar day on the morrow, and of an interminable succession of such days. The which was incomprehensible and offensive to Hilda.

She was in a prison with her mother, and saw no method of escape, saw not so much as a locked door, saw nothing but blank walls. Even could she by a miracle break prison, where should she look for the unknown object of her desire, and for what should she look? Enigmas! It is true that she read, occasionally with feverish enjoyment, especially verse. But she did not and could not read enough. Of the shelf-ful of books which in thirty years had drifted by one accident or another into the Lessways household, she had read every volume, except Cruden’s Concordance[1]. A heterogeneous and forlorn assemblage! Lavater’s *Physiognomy*, in a translation and in full calf! Thomson’s *Seasons*, which had thrilled her by its romantic beauty! Mrs. Henry Wood’s *Danesbury House*, and one or two novels by Charlotte M. Yonge and Dinah Maria Craik, which she had gulped eagerly down for the mere interest of their stories. Disraeli’s *Ixion*, which she had admired without understanding it. A *History of the North American Indians!* These were the more exciting items of the set. The most exciting of all was a green volume of Tennyson’s containing *Maud*. She knew *Maud* by heart. By simple unpleasant obstinacy she had forced her mother to give her this volume for a birthday present, having seen a quotation from it in a ladies’ magazine. At that date in Turnhill, as in many other towns of England, the poem had not yet lived down a reputation for

immorality; but fortunately Mrs. Lessways had only the vaguest notion of its dangerousness, and was indeed a negligent kind of woman. Dangerous the book was! Once in reciting it aloud in her room, Hilda had come so near to fainting that she had had to stop and lie down on the bed, until she could convince herself that she was not the male lover crying to his beloved. An astounding and fearful experience, and not to be too lightly renewed! For Hilda, *Maud* was a source of lovely and exquisite pain.

Why had she not used her force of character to obtain more books? One reason lay in the excessive difficulty to be faced. Birthdays are infrequent; and besides, the enterprise of purchasing *Maud* had proved so complicated and tedious that Mrs. Lessways, with that curious stiffness which marked her sometimes, had sworn never to attempt to buy another book. Turnhill, a town of fifteen thousand persons, had no bookseller; the only bookseller that Mrs. Lessways had ever heard of did business at Oldcastle. Mrs. Lessways had journeyed twice over the Hillport ridge to Oldcastle, in the odd quest of a book called *Maud* by “Tennyson—the poet laureate”; the book had had to be sent from London; and on her second excursion to Oldcastle Mrs. Lessways had been caught by the rain in the middle of Hillport Marsh. No! Hilda could not easily demand the gift of another book, when all sorts of nice, really useful presents could be bought in the High Street. Nor was there in Turnhill a Municipal Library, nor any public lending-library.

Yet possibly Hilda’s terrific egoism might have got fresh books somehow from somewhere, had she really believed in the virtue of books. Thus far, however, books had not furnished her with what she wanted, and her faith in their promise was insecure.

Books failing, might she not have escaped into some vocation? The sole vocation conceivable for her was that of teaching, and she knew, without having tried it, that she abhorred teaching. Further, there was no economical reason

why she should work. In 1878, unless pushed by necessity, no girl might dream of a vocation: the idea was monstrous; it was almost unmentionable. Still further, she had no wish to work for work’s sake. Marriage remained. But she felt herself a child, ages short of marriage. And she never met a man. It was literally a fact that, except Mr. Skellorn, a few tradesmen, the vicar, the curate, and a sidesman or so, she never even spoke to a man from one month’s end to the next. The Church choir had its annual dance, to which she was invited; but the perverse creature cared not for dancing. Her mother did not seek society, did not appear to require it. Nor did Hilda acutely feel the lack of it. She could not define her need. All she knew was that youth, moment by moment, was dropping down inexorably behind her. And, still a child in heart and soul, she saw herself ageing, and then aged, and then withered. Her twenty-first birthday was well above the horizon. Soon, soon, she would be ‘over twenty-one’! And she was not yet born! That was it! She was not yet born! If the passionate strength of desire could have done the miracle time would have stood still in the heavens while Hilda sought the way of life.

And withal she was not wholly unhappy. Just as her attitude to her mother was self-contradictory, so was her attitude towards existence. Sometimes this profound infelicity of hers changed its hues for an instant, and lo! it was bliss that she was bathed in. A phenomenon which disconcerted her! She did not know that she had the most precious of all faculties, the power to feel intensely.

Mr. Skellorn did not come; he was most definitely late.

From the window of her bedroom, at the front of the house, Hilda looked westwards up toward the slopes of Chatterley Wood, where as a child she used to go with other

children to pick the sparse bluebells that thrived on smoke. The bailiwick of Turnhill lay behind her; and all the murky district of the Five Towns, of which Turnhill is the northern outpost, lay to the south. At the foot of Chatterley Wood the canal wound in large curves on its way towards the undefiled plains of Cheshire and the sea. On the canal-side, exactly opposite to Hilda's window, was a flour-mill, that sometimes made nearly as much smoke as the kilns and chimneys closing the prospect on either hand. From the flour-mill a bricked path, which separated a considerable row of new cottages from their appurtenant gardens, led straight into Lessways Street, in front of Mrs. Lessways' house. By this path Mr. Skellorn should have arrived, for he inhabited the farthest of the cottages.

Hilda held Mr. Skellorn in disdain, as she held the row of cottages in disdain. It seemed to her that Mr. Skellorn and the cottages mysteriously resembled each other in their primness, their smugness, their detestable self-complacency. Yet those cottages, perhaps thirty in all, had stood for a great deal until Hilda, glancing at them, shattered them with her scorn. The row was called Freehold Villas: a consciously proud name in a district where much of the land was copyhold and could only change owners subject to the payment of 'fines' and to the feudal consent of a 'court' presided over by the agent of a lord of the manor. Most of the dwellings were owned by their occupiers, who, each an absolute monarch of the soil, niggled in his sooty garden of an evening amid the flutter of drying shirts and towels. Freehold Villas symbolized the final triumph of Victorian economics, the apotheosis of the prudent and industrious artisan. It corresponded with a Building Society Secretary's dream of paradise. And indeed it was a very real achievement. Nevertheless Hilda's irrational contempt would not admit this. She saw in Freehold Villas nothing but narrowness (what long narrow strips of gardens, and what narrow homes all flattened together!), and uniformity, and

brickiness, and polished brassiness, and righteousness, and an eternal laundry.

From the upper floor of her own home she gazed destructively down upon all that, and into the chill, crimson eye of the descending sun. Her own home was not ideal, but it was better than all that. It was one of the two middle houses of a detached terrace of four houses built by her grandfather Lessways, the teapot manufacturer; it was the chief of the four, obviously the habitation of the proprietor of the terrace. One of the corner houses comprised a grocer's shop, and this house had been robbed of its just proportion of garden so that the seigneurial garden-plot might be triflingly larger than the others. The terrace was not a terrace of cottages, but of houses rated at from twenty-six to thirty-six pounds a year; beyond the means of artisans and petty insurance agents and rent-collectors. And further, it was well built, generously built; and its architecture, though debased, showed some faint traces of Georgian amenity. It was admittedly the best row of houses in that newly settled quarter of the town. In coming to it out of Freehold Villas Mr. Skellorn obviously came to something superior, wider, more liberal.

Suddenly Hilda heard her mother's voice, in a rather startled conversational tone, and then another woman speaking; then the voices died away. Mrs. Lessways had evidently opened the back door to somebody, and taken her at once into the sitting-room. The occurrence was unusual. Hilda went softly out on to the landing and listened, but she could catch nothing more than a faint, irregular murmur. Scarcely had she stationed herself on the landing when her mother burst out of the sitting-room, and called loudly:

"Hilda!" And again in an instant, very impatiently and excitedly, long before Hilda could possibly have appeared in response, had she been in her bedroom, as her mother supposed her to be: "Hilda!"

Hilda could see without being seen. Mrs. Lessways' thin, wrinkled face, bordered by her untidy but still black and glossy hair, was upturned from below in an expression of tragic fretfulness. It was the uncontrolled face, shamelessly expressive, of one who thinks himself unwatched. Hilda moved silently to descend, and then demanded in a low tone whose harsh self-possession was a reproof to that volatile creature, her mother:

"What's the matter?"

Mrs. Lessways gave a surprised "Oh!" and like a flash her features changed in the attempt to appear calm and collected.

"I was just coming downstairs," said Hilda. And to herself: "She's always trying to pretend I'm nobody, but when the least thing happens out of the way, she runs to me for all the world like a child." And as Mrs. Lessways offered no reply, but simply stood at the foot of the stairs, she asked again: "What is it?"

"Well," said her mother lamentably. "It's Mr. Skellorn. Here's Mrs. Grant—"

"Who's Mrs. Grant?" Hilda inquired, with a touch of scorn, although she knew perfectly well that Mr. Skellorn had a married daughter of that name.

"Hsh! Hsh!" Mrs. Lessways protested, indicating the open door of the sitting-room. "You know Mrs. Grant! It seems Mr. Skellorn has had a paralytic stroke. Isn't it terrible?"

Hilda continued smoothly to descend the stairs, and followed her mother into the sitting-room.

Chapter 2
The End of the Scene

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I

The linen money-bag[2] and the account-book, proper to the last Wednesday in the month, lay on the green damask cloth of the round table where Hilda and her mother took their meals. A paralytic stroke had not been drastic enough to mar Mr. Skellorn's most precious reputation for probity and reliability. His statement of receipts and expenditure, together with the corresponding cash, had been due at two o'clock, and despite the paralytic stroke it was less than a quarter of an hour late. On one side of the bag and the book were ranged the older women,—Mrs. Lessways, thin and vivacious, and Mrs. Grant, large and solemn; and on the other side, as it were in opposition, the young, dark, slim girl with her rather wiry black hair, and her straight, prominent eyebrows, and her extraordinary expression of uncompromising aloofness.

"She's just enjoying it, that's what she's doing!" said Hilda to herself, of Mrs. Grant.

And the fact was that Mrs. Grant, quite unconsciously, did appear to be savouring the catastrophe with pleasure. Although paralytic strokes were more prevalent at that period than now, they constituted even then a striking dramatic event. Moreover, they were considered as direct visitations of God. Also there was something mysteriously and agreeably impressive in the word 'paralytic,' which people would repeat for the pleasure of repeating it. Mrs. Grant, over whose mighty breast flowed a black mantle

1890s) made him a nationally controversial figure and symbol of secularist and free-thought causes.

26 An older legal/land-use term meaning the adjoining grounds or estate land belonging to a household or manor; here it refers to the neighbouring garden/estate grounds of the Orgreaves and the Clayhangers.

27 The phrase refers to the 100th-anniversary celebrations of the Sunday School movement (commonly traced to Robert Raikes around 1780); the nationwide centenary commemorations were held in Britain around 1880 and featured large public services and processions.

28 A fictional local newspaper in Arnold Bennett's setting of the "Five Towns," a group of towns based on the Staffordshire Potteries (the area around Stoke-on-Trent); newspapers like this represent local news and commerce in the novel's early-20th-century milieu.

29 Refers to the running of a boarding house—renting rooms and providing meals and lodging to lodgers—a common form of small-scale hospitality and income in late 19th–early 20th-century Britain; surrendering it would mean giving up that household trade.

30 A small leather suitcase with a hinged, rigid frame and top opening that was a common personal luggage item in the 19th and early 20th centuries; named after British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone and frequently mentioned in period travel contexts.

31 St Pancras is a major Victorian Gothic railway terminus in London (opened in 1868) noted for its tall turrets and the adjacent Midland Grand Hotel, often invoked in late-19th/early-20th-century writing as a symbol of grand railway architecture.

[32] A railway carriage section for passengers paying a lower fare than first class, with simpler seating and fewer amenities; trains in Britain of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were commonly divided into classed compartments.

[33] A form of road surfacing made from compacted layers of broken stone (developed by John Loudon McAdam in the early 19th century) that produced a gritty, uneven street surface typical of 19th-century towns.

[34] Refers to the West Pier at Brighton, a 19th-century pleasure pier projecting into the sea used for promenading and entertainments; such piers were common features of British seaside resorts.

[35] A banking phrase meaning the money was placed on a demand (or 'at call') deposit, i.e. held by the bank but repayable to the depositor immediately on request rather than locked into a fixed term.

[36] A groin (also spelled groyne) is a man-made barrier built out from a beach into the sea to trap sand and reduce coastal erosion; in the text it denotes a fixed structure on the shoreline that could provide deeper water near its end.

[37] A low, narrow bed on casters that could be rolled under a larger bed for storage; commonly used in British homes and boarding-houses in the 19th and early 20th centuries to save space.

[38] A lockable money box finished with 'japanning,' a durable black lacquer technique developed in Europe to imitate East Asian lacquerwork; such boxes were a common, decorative way to store cash in Victorian and Edwardian households and businesses.

39 Here refers to a principal, fashionable seafront street or promenade in the seaside town described (Brighton in the chapter), known in late 19th–early 20th-century Britain for hotels, shops and public promenading.

40 'Private hotel' in this period usually meant a smaller boarding-house or lodging establishment providing rooms and meals to residents and visitors, distinct from a large 'public' hotel; the name denotes the specific boarding-house George Cannon has taken.

41 A 'bow-window' is a curved or angled projecting window (a form of bay window) common in Victorian/Edwardian architecture; counting 'twenty' emphasizes the building's size and prominent frontage.

42 A British term for a pharmacy or drugstore; in the late 19th/early 20th century chemists sold medicines and also toiletries and small household items (e.g., toothbrushes) rather than only prescription drugs.

43 A low, narrow bed that could be slid under a larger bed (also called a trundle bed), commonly used in cramped lodgings or boarding-houses to provide extra sleeping space.

44 A recurring setting in Arnold Bennett’s novels meaning a group of industrial towns in Staffordshire; it is a fictionalized representation generally identified with the Staffordshire Potteries (now the Stoke-on-Trent area) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

45 Chichester is the name of an actual cathedral city in West Sussex; in the passage it is used as the name of George Cannon’s private hotel, a practice of naming inns or small hotels after towns or cities common in that period.

46 A UK government-run savings system operating through post offices from the 19th century; a "Post Office Savings Bank book" was the passbook recording a depositor's accounts (the scheme later evolved into modern National Savings institutions).

47 A historical civil action in English and other common-law jurisdictions whereby one spouse could ask a court to order the other to resume marital cohabitation; it fell into disuse or was abolished in many places during the 20th century and is not a common remedy today.

48 A fictional town created by Arnold Bennett, one of the settings in his novels, modelled on the industrial pottery towns of Staffordshire (the area around real Stoke-on-Trent).

49 A branded domestic inhaler or ‘smelling-salt’ product sold around the late 19th and early 20th centuries; such preparations containing chloride of ammonia (an older term related to ammonium chloride) were used as respiratory stimulants or palliative inhalants for asthma, faintness, or similar complaints.

50 A collected edition of works by Richard Crashaw, a 17th-century English metaphysical poet (c.1613–1649) known for devotional and religious verse influenced by Catholic mysticism; his poetry was collected and read in later centuries as part of the English literary canon.

51 A commemoration marking the 100th anniversary of the Sunday School movement (often associated with Robert Raikes' work in the 1780s); such centenary events and celebrations took place in Britain in the later 19th century and could be local or national in scope.

52 Rossini’s William Tell is an 1829 opera by Italian composer Gioachino Rossini, whose overture is especially