ARNOLD BENNETT

CLAYHANGER

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His Vocation.

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Chapter One.

The Last of a Schoolboy.

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Edwin Clayhanger stood on the steep-sloping, red-bricked canal bridge, in the valley between Bursley and its suburb Hillport. In that neighbourhood the Knype and Mersey canal formed the western boundary of the industrialism of the Five Towns. To the east rose pitheads, chimneys, and kilns, tier above tier, dim in their own mists. To the west, Hillport Fields, grimed but possessing authentic hedgerows and winding paths, mounted broadly up to the sharp ridge on which stood Hillport Church, a landmark. Beyond the ridge, and partly protected by it from the driving smoke of the Five Towns, lay the fine and ancient Tory borough of Oldcastle, from whose historic Middle School Edwin Clayhanger was now walking home. The fine and ancient Tory borough provided education for the whole of the Five Towns, but the relentless ignorance of its prejudices had blighted the district. A hundred years earlier the canal had only been obtained after a vicious Parliamentary fight between industry and the fine and ancient borough, which saw in canals a menace to its importance as a centre of traffic. Fifty years earlier the fine and ancient borough had succeeded in forcing the greatest railway line in England to run through unpopulated country five miles off instead of through the Five Towns, because it loathed the mere conception of a railway. And now, people are inquiring why the Five Towns, with a railway system special to itself, is characterised by a perhaps excessive provincialism. These interesting details have everything to do with the history of Edwin Clayhanger, as they have everything to do with the history of each of the

two hundred thousand souls in the Five Towns. Oldcastle guessed not the vast influences of its sublime stupidity.

It was a breezy Friday in July 1872. The canal, which ran north and south, reflected a blue and white sky. Towards the bridge, from the north came a long narrow canal-boat roofed with tarpaulins; and towards the bridge, from the south came a similar craft, sluggishly creeping. The towing-path was a morass of sticky brown mud, for, in the way of rain, that year was breaking the records of a century and a half. Thirty yards in front of each boat an unhappy skeleton of a horse floundered its best in the quagmire. The honest endeavour of one of the animals received a frequent tonic from a bare-legged girl of seven who heartily curled a whip about its crooked large-jointed legs. The ragged and filthy child danced in the rich mud round the horse's flanks with the simple joy of one who had been rewarded for good behaviour by the unrestricted use of a whip for the first time.

Two.

Edwin, with his elbows on the stone parapet of the bridge, stared uninterested at the spectacle of the child, the whip, and the skeleton. He was not insensible to the piquancy of the pageant of life, but his mind was preoccupied with grave and heavy matters. He had left school that day, and what his eyes saw as he leaned on the bridge was not a willing beast and a gladdened infant, but the puzzling world and the advance guard of its problems bearing down on him. Slim, gawky, untidy, fair, with his worn black-braided clothes, and slung over his shoulders in a bursting satchel the last load of his schoolbooks, and on his bright, rough hair a shapeless cap whose lining protruded behind, he had the extraordinary wistful look of innocence and simplicity which marks most boys of sixteen. It seemed rather a shame, it seemed even tragic, that this

naive, simple creature, with his straightforward and friendly eyes so eager to believe appearances, this creature immaculate of worldly experience, must soon be transformed into a man, wary, incredulous, detracting. Older eyes might have wept at the simplicity of those eyes.

This picture of Edwin as a wistful innocent would have made Edwin laugh. He had been seven years at school, and considered himself a hardened sort of brute, free of illusions. And he sometimes thought that he could judge the world better than most neighbouring mortals.

“Hello! The Sunday!” he murmured, without turning his eyes.

Another boy, a little younger and shorter, and clothed in a superior untidiness, had somehow got on to the bridge, and was leaning with his back against the parapet which supported Edwin’s elbows. His eyes were franker and simpler even than the eyes of Edwin, and his lips seemed to be permanently parted in a good-humoured smile. His name was Charlie Orgreave, but at school he was invariably called “the Sunday”—not “Sunday,” but “the Sunday”—and nobody could authoritatively explain how he had come by the nickname. Its origin was lost in the prehistoric ages of his childhood. He and Edwin had been chums for several years. They had not sworn fearful oaths of loyalty; they did not constitute a secret society; they had not even pricked forearms and written certain words in blood; for these rites are only performed at Harrow, and possibly at the Oldcastle High School, which imitates Harrow. Their fellowship meant chiefly that they spent a great deal of time together, instinctively and unconsciously enjoying each other’s mere presence, and that in public arguments they always reinforced each other, whatever the degree of intellectual dishonesty thereby necessitated.

“I’ll bet you mine gets to the bridge first,” said the Sunday. With an ingenious movement of the shoulders he

arranged himself so that the parapet should bear the weight of his satchel.

Edwin Clayhanger slowly turned round, and perceived that the object which the Sunday had appropriated as “his” was the other canal-boat, advancing from the south.

“Horse or boat?” asked Edwin.

“Boat’s nose, of course,” said the Sunday.

“Well,” said Edwin, having surveyed the unconscious competitors, and counting on the aid of the whipping child, “I don’t mind laying you five.”

“That be damned for a tale!” protested the Sunday. “We said we’d never bet less than ten—you know that.”

“Yes, but—” Edwin hesitatingly drawled.

“But what?”

“All right. Ten,” Edwin agreed. “But it’s not fair. You’ve got a rare start on me.”

“Rats!” said the Sunday, with finality. In the pronunciation of this word the difference between his accent and Edwin’s came out clear. The Sunday’s accent was less local; there was a hint of a short “e” sound in the “a,” and a briskness about the consonants, that Edwin could never have compassed. The Sunday’s accent was as carelessly superior as his clothes. Evidently the Sunday had some one at home who had not learnt the art of speech in the Five Towns.

Three.

He began to outline a scheme, in which perpendicular expectoration figured, for accurately deciding the winner, and a complicated argument might have ensued about this, had it not soon become apparent that Edwin’s boat was going to be handsomely beaten, despite the joyous efforts of the little child. The horse that would die but would not give up, was only saved from total subsidence at every step by his indomitable if aged spirit. Edwin handed over the ten

marbles even before the other boat had arrived at the bridge.

"Here," he said. "And you may as well have these, too," adding five more to the ten, all he possessed. They were not the paltry marble of today, plaything of infants, but the majestic "rinker," black with white spots, the king of marbles in an era when whole populations practised the game. Edwin looked at them half regretfully as they lay in the Sunday's hands. They seemed prodigious wealth in those hands, and he felt somewhat as a condemned man might feel who bequeaths his jewels on the scaffold. Then there was a rattle, and a tumour grew out larger on the Sunday's thigh.

The winning boat, long preceded by its horse, crawled under the bridge and passed northwards to the sea, laden with crates of earthenware. And then the loser, with the little girl's father and mother and her brothers and sisters, and her kitchen, drawing-room, and bedroom, and her smoking chimney and her memories and all that was hers, in the stern of it, slid beneath the boys' down-turned faces while the whip cracked away beyond the bridge. They could see, between the whitened tarpaulins, that the deep belly of the craft was filled with clay.

"Where does that there clay come from?" asked Edwin. For not merely was he honestly struck by a sudden new curiosity, but it was meet for him to behave like a man now, and to ask manly questions.

"Runcorn," said the Sunday scornfully. "Can't you see it painted all over the boat?"

"Why do they bring clay all the way from Runcorn?"

"They don't bring it from Runcorn. They bring it from Cornwall. It comes round by sea—see?" He laughed.

"Who told you?" Edwin roughly demanded.

"Anybody knows that!" said the Sunday grandly, but always maintaining his gay smile.

“Seems devilish funny to me,” Edwin murmured, after reflection, “that they should bring clay all that roundabout way just to make crocks of it here. Why should they choose just this place to make crocks in? I always understood—”

“Oh! Come on!” the Sunday cut him short. “It’s blessed well one o’clock and after!”

Four.

They climbed the long bank from the canal up to the Manor Farm, at which high point their roads diverged, one path leading direct to Bleakridge where Orgreave lived, and the other zigzagging down through neglected pasturage into Bursley proper. Usually they parted here without a word, taking pride in such Spartan taciturnity, and they would doubtless have done the same this morning also, though it were fifty-fold their last walk together as two schoolboys. But an incident intervened.

“Hold on!” cried the Sunday.

To the south of them, a mile and a half off, in the wreathing mist of the Cauldon Bar Ironworks, there was a yellow gleam that even the capricious sunlight could not kill, and then two rivers of fire sprang from the gleam and ran in a thousand delicate and lovely hues down the side of a mountain of refuse. They were emptying a few tons of molten slag at the Cauldon Bar Ironworks. The two rivers hung slowly dying in the mists of smoke. They reddened and faded, and you thought they had vanished, and you could see them yet, and then they escaped the baffled eye, unless a cloud aided them for a moment against the sun; and their ephemeral but enchanting beauty had expired for ever.

“Now!” said Edwin sharply.

“One minute ten seconds,” said the Sunday, who had snatched out his watch, an inestimable contrivance with a centre-seconds hand. “By Jove! That was a good ’un.”

A moment later two smaller boys, both laden with satchels, appeared over the brow from the canal.

“Let’s wait a jiff,” said the Sunday to Edwin, and as the smaller boys showed no hurry he bawled out to them across the intervening cinder-waste: “Run!” They ran. They were his younger brothers, Johnnie and Jimmie. “Take this and hook it!” he commanded, passing the strap of his satchel over his head as they came up. In fatalistic silence they obeyed the smiling tyrant.

“What are you going to do?” Edwin asked.

“I’m coming down your way a bit.”

“But I thought you said you were peckish.”

“I shall eat three slices of beef instead of my usual brace,” said the Sunday carelessly.

Edwin was touched. And the Sunday was touched, because he knew he had touched Edwin. After all, this was a solemn occasion. But neither would overtly admit that its solemnity had affected him. Hence, first one and then the other began to skim stones with vicious force over the surface of the largest of the three ponds that gave interest to the Manor Farm. When they had thus proved to themselves that the day differed in no manner from any other breaking-up day, they went forward.

On their left were two pitheads whose double wheels revolved rapidly in smooth silence, and the puffing engine-house and all the trucks and gear of a large ironstone mine. On their right was the astonishing farm, with barns and ricks and cornfields complete, seemingly quite unaware of its forlorn oddness in that foul arena of manufacture. In front, on a little hill in the vast valley, was spread out the Indian-red architecture of Bursley—tall chimneys and rounded ovens, schools, the new scarlet market, the grey tower of the old church, the high spire of the evangelical church, the low spire of the church of genuflexions, and the crimson chapels, and rows of little red houses with amber chimney-pots, and the gold angel of the blackened Town Hall topping

the whole. The sedate reddish browns and reds of the composition, all netted in flowing scarves of smoke, harmonised exquisitely with the chill blues of the chequered sky. Beauty was achieved, and none saw it.

The boys descended without a word through the brick-strewn pastures, where a horse or two cropped the short grass. At the railway bridge, which carried a branch mineral line over the path, they exchanged a brief volley of words with the working-lads who always played pitch-and-toss there in the dinner-hour; and the Sunday added to the collection of shawds and stones lodged on the under ledges of the low iron girders. A strange boy, he had sworn to put ten thousand stones on those ledges before he died, or perish in the attempt. Hence Edwin sometimes called him "Old Perish-inthe-attempt." A little farther on the open gates of a manufactory disclosed six men playing the noble game of rinkers on a smooth patch of ground near the weighing machine. These six men were Messieurs Ford, Carter, and Udall, the three partners owning the works, and three of their employees. They were celebrated marble-players, and the boys stayed to watch them as, bending with one knee almost touching the earth, they shot the rinkers from their stubby thumbs with a canon-like force and precision that no boy could ever hope to equal. "By gum!" mumbled Edwin involuntarily, when an impossible shot was accomplished; and the bearded shooter, pleased by this tribute from youth, twisted his white apron into a still narrower ring round his waist. Yet Edwin was not thinking about the game. He was thinking about a battle that lay before him, and how he would be weakened in the fight by the fact that in the last school examination, Charlie Orgreave, younger than himself by a year, had ousted him from the second place in the school. The report in his pocket said: "Position in class next term: third;" whereas he had been second since the beginning of the year. There would of course be no "next term" for him, but the report remained. A youth who has

come to grips with that powerful enemy, his father, cannot afford to be handicapped by even such a trifle as a report entirely irrelevant to the struggle.

Suddenly Charlie Orgreave gave a curt nod, and departed, in nonchalant good-humour, doubtless considering that to accompany his chum any farther would be to be guilty of girlish sentimentality. And Edwin nodded with equal curtness and made off slowly into the maze of Bursley. The thought in his heart was: “I’m on my own, now. I’ve got to face it now, by myself.” And he felt that not merely his father, but the leagued universe, was against him.

Chapter Two.

The Flame.

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The various agencies which society has placed at the disposal of a parent had been at work on Edwin in one way or another for at least a decade, in order to equip him for just this very day when he should step into the world. The moment must therefore be regarded as dramatic, the first crucial moment of an experiment long and elaborately prepared. Knowledge was admittedly the armour and the weapon of one about to try conclusions with the world, and many people for many years had been engaged in providing Edwin with knowledge. He had received, in fact, “a good education”—or even, as some said, “a thoroughly sound education;” assuredly as complete an equipment of knowledge as could be obtained in the county, for the curriculum of the Oldcastle High School was less in accord with common sense than that of the Middle School.

He knew, however, nothing of natural history, and in particular of himself, of the mechanism of the body and mind, through which his soul had to express and fulfil itself. Not one word of information about either physiology or psychology had ever been breathed to him, nor had it ever occurred to any one around him that such information was needful. And as no one had tried to explain to him the mysteries which he carried about with him inside that fair skin of his, so no one had tried to explain to him the mysteries by which he was hemmed in, either mystically through religion, or rationally through philosophy. Never in chapel or at Sunday school had a difficulty been genuinely faced. And as for philosophy, he had not the slightest

conception of what it meant. He imagined that a philosopher was one who made the best of a bad job, and he had never heard the word used in any other sense. He had great potential intellectual curiosity, but nobody had thought to stimulate it by even casually telling him that the finest minds of humanity had been trying to systematise the mysteries for quite twenty-five centuries. Of physical science he had been taught nothing, save a grotesque perversion to the effect that gravity was a force which drew things towards the centre of the earth. In the matter of chemistry it had been practically demonstrated to him scores of times, so that he should never forget this grand basic truth, that sodium and potassium may be relied upon to fizz flamingly about on a surface of water. Of geology he was perfectly ignorant, though he lived in a district whose whole livelihood depended on the scientific use of geological knowledge, and though the existence of Oldcastle itself was due to a freak of the earth's crust which geologists call a "fault."

Two.

Geography had been one of his strong points. He was aware of the rivers of Asia in their order, and of the principal products of Uruguay; and he could name the capitals of nearly all the United States. But he had never been instructed for five minutes in the geography of his native county, of which he knew neither the boundaries nor the rivers nor the terrene characteristics. He could have drawn a map of the Orinoco, but he could not have found the Trent in a day's march; he did not even know where his drinking-water came from. That geographical considerations are the cause of all history had never been hinted to him, nor that history bears immediately upon modern life and bore on his own life. For him history hung unsupported and unsupporting in the air. In the course of his school career he

had several times approached the nineteenth century, but it seemed to him that for administrative reasons he was always being dragged back again to the Middle Ages. Once his form had “got” as far as the infancy of his own father, and concerning this period he had learnt that “great dissatisfaction prevailed among the labouring classes, who were led to believe by mischievous demagogues,” etcetera. But the next term he was recoiling round Henry the Eighth, who “was a skilful warrior and politician,” but “unfortunate in his domestic relations;” and so to Elizabeth, than whom “few sovereigns have been so much belied, but her character comes out unscathed after the closest examination.” History indeed resolved itself into a series of more or less sanguinary events arbitrarily grouped under the names of persons who had to be identified with the assistance of numbers. Neither of the development of national life, nor of the clash of nations, did he really know anything that was not inessential and anecdotic. He could not remember the clauses of Magna Charta, but he knew eternally that it was signed at a place amusingly called Runnymede. And the one fact engraved on his memory about the battle of Waterloo was that it was fought on a Sunday.

And as he had acquired absolutely nothing about political economy or about logic, and was therefore at the mercy of the first agreeable sophistry that might take his fancy by storm, his unfitness to commence the business of being a citizen almost reached perfection.

Three.

For his personal enjoyment of the earth and air and sun and stars, and of society and solitude, no preparation had been made, or dreamt of. The sentiment of nature had never been encouraged in him, or even mentioned. He knew not how to look at a landscape nor at a sky. Of plants and

trees he was as exquisitely ignorant as of astronomy. It had not occurred to him to wonder why the days are longer in summer, and he vaguely supposed that the cold of winter was due to an increased distance of the earth from the sun. Still, he had learnt that Saturn had a ring, and sometimes he unconsciously looked for it in the firmament, as for a tea-tray.

Of art, and the arts, he had been taught nothing. He had never seen a great picture or statue, nor heard great orchestral or solo music; and he had no idea that architecture was an art and emotional, though it moved him in a very peculiar fashion. Of the art of English literature, or of any other literature, he had likewise been taught nothing. But he knew the meaning of a few obsolete words in a few plays of Shakespeare. He had not learnt how to express himself orally in any language, but through hard drilling he was so genuinely erudite in accidence and syntax that he could parse and analyse with superb assurance the most magnificent sentences of Milton, Virgil, and Racine. This skill, together with an equal skill in utilising the elementary properties of numbers and geometrical figures, was the most brilliant achievement of his long apprenticeship.

And now his education was finished. It had cost his father twenty-eight shillings a term, or four guineas a year, and no trouble. In younger days his father had spent more money and far more personal attention on the upbringing of a dog. His father had enjoyed success with dogs through treating them as individuals. But it had not happened to him, nor to anybody in authority, to treat Edwin as an individual. Nevertheless it must not be assumed that Edwin’s father was a callous and conscienceless brute, and Edwin a martyr of neglect. Old Clayhanger was, on the contrary, an average upright and respectable parent who had given his son a thoroughly sound education, and Edwin had had the good fortune to receive that thoroughly sound education, as a preliminary to entering the world.

Four.

He was very far from realising the imperfections of his equipment for the grand entry; but still he was not without uneasiness. In particular the conversation incident to the canal-boat wager was disturbing him. It amazed him, as he reflected, that he should have remained, to such an advanced age, in a state of ignorance concerning the origin of the clay from which the crocks of his native district were manufactured. That the Sunday should have been able to inform him did not cause him any shame, for he guessed from the peculiar eager tone of voice in which the facts had been delivered, that the Sunday was merely retailing some knowledge recently acquired by chance. He knew all the Sunday's tones of voice; and he also was well aware that the Sunday's brain was not on the whole better stored than his own. Further, the Sunday was satisfied with his bit of accidental knowledge. Edwin was not. Edwin wanted to know why, if the clay for making earthenware was not got in the Five Towns, the Five Towns had become the great seat of the manufacture. Why were not pots made in the South, where the clay came from? He could not think of any answer to this enigma, nor of any means of arriving by himself at an answer. The feeling was that he ought to have been able to arrive at the answer as at the answer to an equation.

He did not definitely blame his education; he did not think clearly about the thing at all. But, as a woman with a vague discomfort dimly fears cancer, so he dimly feared that there might be something fundamentally unsound in this sound education of his. And he had remorse for all the shirking that he had been guilty of during all his years at school. He shook his head solemnly at the immense and nearly universal shirking that continually went on. He could only acquit three or four boys, among the hundreds he had known, of the shameful sin. And all that he could say in

favour of himself was that there were many worse than Edwin Clayhanger. Not merely the boys, but the masters, were sinners. Only two masters could he unreservedly respect as having acted conscientiously up to their pretensions, and one of these was an unpleasant brute. All the cleverness, the ingenuities, the fakes, the insincerities, the incapacitaties, the vanities, and the dishonesties of the rest stood revealed to him, and he judged them by the mere essential force of character alone. A schoolmaster might as well attempt to deceive God as a boy who is watching him every day with the inhuman eye of youth.

"All this must end now!" he said to himself, meaning all that could be included in the word "shirk."

Five.

He was splendidly serious. He was as splendidly serious as a reformer. By a single urgent act of thought he would have made himself a man, and changed imperfection into perfection. He desired—and there was real passion in his desire—to do his best, to exhaust himself in doing his best, in living according to his conscience. He did not know of what he was capable, nor what he could achieve. Achievement was not the matter of his desire; but endeavour, honest and terrific endeavour. He admitted to himself his shortcomings, and he did not under-estimate the difficulties that lay before him; but he said, thinking of his father: "Surely he'll see I mean business! Surely he's bound to give in when he sees how much in earnest I am!" He was convinced, almost, that passionate faith could move mountainous fathers.

"I'll show 'em!" he muttered.

And he meant that he would show the world... He was honouring the world; he was paying the finest homage to it. In that head of his a flame burnt that was like an altar-fire, a miraculous and beautiful phenomenon, than which nothing

is more miraculous nor more beautiful over the whole earth. Whence had it suddenly sprung, that flame? After years of muddy inefficiency, of contentedness with the second-rate and the dishonest, that flame astoundingly bursts forth, from a hidden, unheeded spark that none had ever thought to blow upon. It bursts forth out of a damp jungle of careless habits and negligence that could not possibly have fed it. There is little to encourage it. The very architecture of the streets shows that environment has done naught for it: ragged brickwork, walls finished anyhow with saggars and slag; narrow uneven alleys leading to higgledy-piggledy workshops and kilns; cottages transformed into factories and factories into cottages, clumsily, hastily, because nothing matters so long as “it will do;” everywhere something forced to fulfil, badly, the function of something else; in brief, the reign of the slovenly makeshift, shameless, filthy, and picturesque. Edwin himself seemed no tabernacle for that singular flame. He was not merely untidy and dirty—at his age such defects might have excited in a sane observer uneasiness by their absence; but his gestures and his gait were untidy. He did not mind how he walked. All his sprawling limbs were saying: “What does it matter, so long as we get there?” The angle of the slatternly bag across his shoulders was an insult to the flame. And yet the flame burned with serene and terrible pureness.

It was surprising that no one saw it passing along the mean, black, smoke-palled streets that huddle about Saint Luke’s Church. Sundry experienced and fat old women were standing or sitting at their cottage doors, one or two smoking cutties. But even they, who in child-bed and at gravesides had been at the very core of life for long years, they, who saw more than most, could only see a fresh lad passing along, with fair hair and a clear complexion, and gawky knees and elbows, a fierce, rapt expression on his straightforward, good-natured face. Some knew that it was “Clayhanger’s lad,” a nice-behaved young gentleman, and

the spitten image of his poor mother. They all knew what a lad is—the feel of his young skin under his “duds,” the capricious freedom of his movements, his sudden madnesses and shoutings and tendernesses, and the exceeding power of his unconscious wistful charm. They could divine all that in a glance. But they could not see the mysterious and holy flame of the desire for self-perfection blazing within that tousled head. And if Edwin had suspected that anybody could indeed perceive it, he would have whipped it out for shame, though the repudiation had meant everlasting death. Such is youth in the Five Towns, if not elsewhere.

Chapter Three.

Entry into the World.

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Edwin came steeply out of the cinder-strewn back streets by Woodisun Bank [hill] into Duck Square, nearly at the junction of Trafalgar Road and Wedgwood Street. A few yards down Woodisun Bank, cocks and hens were scurrying, with necks horizontal, from all quarters, and were even flying, to the call of a little old woman who threw grain from the top step of her porch. On the level of the narrow pavement stood an immense constable, clad in white trousers, with a gun under his arm for the killing of mad dogs; he was talking to the woman, and their two heads were exactly at the same height. On a pair of small double gates near the old woman's cottage were painted the words, "Steam Printing Works. No admittance except on business." And from as far as Duck Square could be heard the puff-puff which proved the use of steam in this works to which idlers and mere pleasure-seekers were forbidden access.

Duck Square was one of the oldest, if the least imposing, of all the public places in Bursley. It had no traffic across it, being only a sloping rectangle, like a vacant lot, with Trafalgar Road and Wedgwood Street for its exterior sides, and no outlet on its inner sides. The buildings on those inner sides were low and humble and, as it were, withdrawn from the world, the chief of them being the ancient Duck Inn, where the hand-bell ringers used to meet. But Duck Square looked out upon the very birth of Trafalgar Road, that wide, straight thoroughfare, whose name dates it, which had been invented, in the lifetime of a few then living, to unite Bursley

with Hanbridge. It also looked out upon the birth of several old pack-horse roads which Trafalgar Road had supplanted. One of these was Woodisun Bank, that wound slowly up hill and down dale, apparently always choosing the longest and hardest route, to Hanbridge; and another was Aboukir Street, formerly known as Warm Lane, that reached Hanbridge in a manner equally difficult and unhurried. At the junction of Trafalgar Road and Aboukir Street stood the Dragon Hotel, once the great posting-house of the town, from which all roads started. Duck Square had watched coaches and waggons stop at and start from the Dragon Hotel for hundreds of years. It had seen the Dragon rebuilt in brick and stone, with fine bay windows on each storey, in early Georgian times, and it had seen even the new structure become old and assume the dignity of age. Duck Square could remember strings of pack-mules driven by women, ‘trapesing’ in zigzags down Woodisun Bank and Warm Lane, and occasionally falling, with awful smashes of the crockery they carried, in the deep, slippery, scarce passable mire of the first slants into the valley. Duck Square had witnessed the slow declension of these roads into mere streets, and slum streets at that, and the death of all mules, and the disappearance of all coaches and all neighing and prancing and whipcracking romance; while Trafalgar Road, simply because it was straight and broad and easily graded, flourished with toll-bars and a couple of pair-horsed trams that ran on lines. And many people were proud of those cushioned trams; but perhaps they had never known that coach-drivers used to tell each other about the state of the turn at the bottom of Warm Lane (since absurdly renamed in honour of an Egyptian battle), and that Woodisun Bank (now unnoticed save by doubtful characters, policemen, and schoolboys) was once regularly ‘taken’ by four horses at a canter. The history of human manners is crunched and embedded in the very macadam of that part of the borough, and the burgesses unheedingly tread it down every day and

talk gloomily about the ugly smoky prose of industrial manufacture. And yet the Dragon Hotel, safely surviving all revolutions by the mighty virtue and attraction of ale, stands before them to remind them of the interestingness of existence.

Two.

At the southern corner of Trafalgar Road and Wedgwood Street, with Duck Square facing it, the Dragon Hotel and Warm Lane to its right, and Woodisun Bank creeping inconspicuously down to its left, stood a three-storey building consisting of house and shop, the frontage being in Wedgwood Street. Over the double-windowed shop was a discreet signboard in gilt letters, “D. Clayhanger, Printer and Stationer,” but above the first floor was a later and much larger sign, with the single word, “Steam-printing.” All the brickwork of the facade was painted yellow, and had obviously been painted yellow many times; the woodwork of the plate-glass windows was a very dark green approaching black. The upper windows were stumpy, almost square, some dirty and some clean and curtained, with prominent sills and architraves. The line of the projecting spouting at the base of the roof was slightly curved through subsidence; at either end of the roof-ridge rose twin chimneys each with three salmon-coloured chimney-pots. The gigantic word ‘Steam-printing’ could be seen from the windows of the Dragon, from the porch of the big Wesleyan chapel higher up the slope, from the Conservative Club and the playground at the top of the slope; and as for Duck Square itself, it could see little else. The left-hand shop window was alluringly set out with the lighter apparatus of writing and reading, and showed incidentally several rosy pictures of ideal English maidens; that to the right was grim and heavy with ledgers, inks, and variegated specimens of steam-printing.

Three.

In the wedge-shaped doorway between the windows stood two men, one middle-aged and one old, one bareheaded and the other with a beaver hat, engaged in conversation. They were talking easily, pleasantly, with free gestures, the younger looking down in deferential smiles at the elder, and the elder looking up benignantly at the younger. You could see that, having begun with a business matter, they had quitted it for a topic of the hour. But business none the less went forward, the shop functioned, the presses behind the shop were being driven by steam as advertised; a customer emerged, and was curtly nodded at by the proprietor as he squeezed past; a girl with a small flannel apron over a large cotton apron went timidly into the shop. The trickling, calm commerce of a provincial town was proceeding, bit being added to bit and item to item, until at the week's end a series of apparent nothings had swollen into the livelihood of near half a score of people. And nobody perceived how interesting it was, this interchange of activities, this ebb and flow of money, this sluggish rise and fall of reputations and fortunes, stretching out of one century into another and towards a third! Printing had been done at that corner, though not by steam, since the time of the French Revolution. Bibles and illustrated herbals had been laboriously produced by hand at that corner, and hawked on the backs of asses all over the county; and nobody heard romance in the puffing of the hidden steam-engine multiplying catalogues and billheads on the self-same spot at the rate of hundreds an hour.

The younger and bigger of the two men chatting in the doorway was Darius Clayhanger, Edwin's father, and the first printer to introduce steam into Bursley. His age was then under forty-five, but he looked more. He was dressed in black, with an ample shirt-front and a narrow black cravat

tied in an angular bow; the wristbands were almost tight on the wrists, and, owing to the shortness of the alpaca coat-sleeves, they were very visible even as Darius Clayhanger stood, with his two hands deep in the horizontal pockets of his ‘full-fall’ trousers. They were not precisely dirty, these wristbands, nor was the shirt-front, nor the turned-down pointed collar, but all the linen looked as though it would scarcely be wearable the next day. Clayhanger’s linen invariably looked like that, not dirty and not clean; and further, he appeared to wear eternally the same suit, ever on the point of being done for and never being done for. The trousers always had marked transverse creases; the waistcoat always showed shiningly the outline of every article in the pockets thereof, and it always had a few stains down the front (and never more than a few), and the lowest button insecure. The coat, faintly discoloured round the collar and fretted at the cuffs, fitted him easily and loosely like the character of an old crony; it was as if it had grown up with him, and had expanded with his girth. His head was a little bald on the top, but there was still a great deal of mixed brown and greyish hair at the back and the sides, and the moustache, hanging straight down with an effect recalling the mouth of a seal, was plenteous and defiant—a moustache of character, contradicting the full placidity of the badly shaved chin. Darius Clayhanger had a habit, when reflective or fierce, of biting with his upper teeth as far down as he could on the lower lip; this trick added emphasis to the moustache. He stood, his feet in their clumsy boots planted firmly about sixteen inches apart, his elbows sticking out, and his head bent sideways, listening to and answering his companion with mien now eager, now roguish, now distinctly respectful.

The older man, Mr Shushions, was apparently very old. He was one of those men of whom one says in conclusion that they are very old. He seemed to be so fully occupied all the time in conducting those physical operations which we

perform without thinking of them, that each in his case became a feat. He balanced himself on his legs with conscious craft; he directed carefully his shaking and gnarled hand to his beard in order to stroke it. When he collected his thoughts into a sentence and uttered it in his weak, quavering voice, he did something wonderful; he listened closely, as though to an imperfectly acquired foreign language; and when he was not otherwise employed, he gave attention to the serious business of breathing. He wore a black silk stock, in a style even more antique than his remarkable headgear, and his trousers were very tight. He had survived into another and a more fortunate age than his own.

Four.

Edwin, his heavy bag on his shoulders, found the doorway blocked by these two. He hesitated with a diffident charming smile, feeling, as he often did in front of his father, that he ought to apologise for his existence, and yet fiercely calling himself an ass for such a sentiment. Darius Clayhanger nodded at him carelessly, but not without a surprising benevolence, over his shoulder.

“This is him,” said Darius briefly.

Edwin was startled to catch a note of pride in his father’s voice.

Little Mr Shushions turned slowly and looked up at Edwin’s face (for he was shorter even than the boy), and gradually acquainted himself with the fact that Edwin was the son of his father.

“Is this thy son, Darius?” he asked; and his ancient eyes were shining.

Edwin had scarcely ever heard any one address his father by his Christian name.

Darius nodded; and then, seeing the old man’s hand creeping out towards him, Edwin pulled off his cap and took

the hand, and was struck by the hot smooth brittleness of the skin and the earnest tremulous weakness of the caressing grasp. Edwin had never seen Mr Shushions before.

“Nay, nay, my boy,” trembled the old man, “don’t bare thy head to me ... not to me! I’m one o’ th’ ould sort. Eh, I’m rare glad to see thee!” He kept Edwin’s hand, and stared long at him, with his withered face transfigured by solemn emotion. Slowly he turned towards Darius, and pulled himself together. “Thou’st begotten a fine lad, Darius! ... a fine, honest lad!”

“So-so!” said Darius gruffly, whom Edwin was amazed to see in a state of agitation similar to that of Mr Shushions.

The men gazed at each other; Edwin looked at the ground and other unresponsive objects.

“Edwin,” his father said abruptly, “run and ask Big James for th’ proof of that Primitive Methodist hymn-paper; there’s a good lad.”

And Edwin hastened through the shadowy shop as if loosed from a captivity, and in passing threw his satchel down on a bale of goods.

Five.

He comprehended nothing of the encounter; neither as to the origin of the old man’s status in his father’s esteem, nor as to the cause of his father’s strange emotion. He regarded the old man impatiently as an aged simpleton, probably over pious, certainly connected with the Primitive Methodists. His father had said ‘There’s a good lad’ almost cajolingly. And this was odd; for, though nobody could be more persuasively agreeable than his father when he chose, the occasions when he cared to exert his charm, especially over his children, were infrequent, and getting more so. Edwin also saw something symbolically ominous in his being sent direct to the printing office. It was no affair of his to go