E. F. BENSON

THE BLOTTING BOOK

'Bristles with elegant suspense' *Washington Post*

VINTAGE

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About the Book

Morris Assheton is in love and means to be married. But his happiness is spoilt when he discovers that someone has been whispering poisonous rumours about him to the girl's father. The culprit is Mills, dastardly partner to the Assheton family's trusted lawyer. Morris vows revenge.

When Mills' body is discovered, brutally beaten, the ugly quarrel comes to light and suspicion naturally falls on Morris. His innocence is debated in a tense courtroom, as an eager public and press look on.

Murder mystery...Courtdroom drama. This is a classic detective story from the author of *Mapp and Lucia*. Crime fiction at its best.

About the Author

Edward Frederick Benson was born on 24 July 1867 in Berkshire, the son of a future Archbishop of Canterbury, and one of six children. He studied at Kings College, Cambridge, and at the British School of Archaeology in Athens. Benson's first book, *Dodo*, was published to popular acclaim in 1893 and was followed by over a hundred books, including novels, histories, biographies and ghost stories. In 1920 Benson became a fulltime tenant of Lamb House in Rye, which had once been home to the novelist Henry James. Rye provided the setting for Benson's popular 'Mapp and Lucia' stories and their author served three terms as mayor of Rye in the late 1930s. E. F. Benson died on 29 February 1940.

ALSO BY E. F. BENSON

Queen Lucia
Miss Mapp
Lucia in London
Lucia's Progress
Trouble for Lucia
The Luck of the Vails

E. F. BENSON

The Blotting Book

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Chapter I

MRS ASSHETON'S HOUSE in Sussex Square, Brighton, was appointed with that finish of smooth stateliness which robs stateliness of its formality, and conceals the amount of trouble and personal attention which has, originally in any case, been spent on the production of the smoothness. Everything moved with the regularity of the solar system, and, superior to that wild rush of heavy bodies through infinite ether, there was never the slightest fear of comets streaking their unconjectured way across the sky, or meteorites falling on unsuspicious picnickers. In Mrs Assheton's house, supreme over climatic conditions, nobody ever felt that rooms were either too hot or too cold, a pleasantly fresh yet comfortably warm atmosphere pervaded the place, meals were always punctual and her admirable Scotch cook never served up a dish which, whether plain or ornate, was not, in its way, perfectly prepared. A couple of deft and noiseless parlour-maids attended to and anticipated the wants of her guests, from the moment they entered her hospitable doors till when, on their leaving them, their coats were held for them in the most convenient possible manner for the easy insertion of the human arm, and the tails of their dinner-coats cunningly and unerringly tweaked from behind. In every way in fact the house was an example of perfect comfort; the softest carpets overlaid the floors, or, where the polished wood was left bare, the parquetry shone with a moonlike radiance; the newest and most entertaining books (ready cut) stood on the well-ordered shelves in the sitting-room to beguile the leisure of the studiously minded; the billiard table was

always speckless of dust, no tip was ever missing from any cue, and the cigarette boxes and match-stands were always kept replenished. In the dining-room the silver was resplendent, until the moment when before dessert the cloth was withdrawn, and showed a rosewood table that might have served for a mirror to Narcissus.

Mrs Assheton, until her only surviving son Morris had come to live with her some three months ago on the completion of his four years at Cambridge, had been alone, but even when she was alone this ceremony of drawing the cloth and putting on the dessert and wine had never been omitted, though since she never took either, it might seem to be a wasted piece of routine on the part of the two noiseless parlour-maids. But she did not in the least consider it so, for just as she always dressed for dinner herself with the same care and finish, whether she was going to dine alone or whether, as tonight, a guest or two was dining with her, as an offering, so to speak, on the altar of her own self-respect, so also she required self-respect and the formality that indicated it on the part of those who ministered at her table, and enjoyed such excellent wages. This pretty old-fashioned custom had always been the rule in her own home, and her husband had always had it practised during his life. And since then — his death had occurred some twenty years ago — nothing that she knew of had happened to make it less proper or desirable. Kind of heart and warm of soul though she was, she saw no reason for letting these excellent qualities cover any slackness or breach of observance in the social form of life to which she had been accustomed. There was no cause, because one was kind and wise, to eat with badly cleaned silver, unless the parlour-maid whose office it was to clean it was unwell. In such a case, if the extra work entailed by her illness would throw too much on the shoulders of the other servants, Mrs Assheton would willingly clean the silver herself, rather than that it should appear dull and tarnished.

Her formalism, such as it was, was perfectly simple and sincere. She would, without any very poignant regret or sense of martyrdom, had her very comfortable income been cut down to a tenth of what it was, have gone to live in a four-roomed cottage with one servant. But she would have left that four-roomed cottage at once for even humbler surroundings had she found that her straitened circumstances did not permit her to keep it as speckless and *soignée* as was her present house in Sussex Square.

This achievement of having lived for nearly sixty years so decorously may perhaps be a somewhat finer performance than it sounds, but Mrs Assheton brought as her contribution to life in general a far finer offering than that, for though she did not propose to change her ways and manner of life herself, she was notoriously sympathetic with the changed life of the younger generation, and in consequence had the confidence of young folk generally. At this moment she was enjoying the fruits of her liberal attitude in the volubility of her son Morris, who sat at the end of the table opposite to her. His volubility was at present concerned with his motor-car, in which he had arrived that afternoon.

‘Darling mother,’ he was saying, ‘I really was frightened as to whether you would mind. I couldn’t help remembering how you received Mr Taynton’s proposal that you should go for a drive in his car. Don’t you remember, Mr Taynton? Mother’s nose did go in the air. It’s no use denying it. So I thought, perhaps, that she wouldn’t like my having one. But I wanted it so dreadfully, and so I bought it without telling her, and drove down in it today, which is my birthday, so that she couldn’t be too severe.’

Mr Taynton, while Morris was speaking, had picked up the nutcrackers the boy had been using, and was gravely exploding the shells of the nuts he had helped himself to. So Morris cracked the next one with a loud bang between his white even teeth.

‘Dear Morris,’ said his mother, ‘how foolish of you. Give Mr Morris another nutcracker,’ she added to the parlour-maid.

‘What’s foolish?’ asked he, cracking another.

‘Oh Morris, your teeth,’ she said. ‘Do wait a moment. Yes, that’s right. And how can you say that my nose went in the air? I’m sure Mr Taynton will agree with me that that is really libellous. And as for your being afraid to tell me you had bought a motor-car yourself, why, that is sillier than cracking nuts with your teeth.’

Mr Taynton laughed a comfortable middle-aged laugh.

‘Don’t put the responsibility on me, Mrs Assheton,’ he said. ‘As long as Morris’s bank doesn’t tell us that his account is overdrawn, he can do what he pleases. But if we are told that, then down comes the cartloads of bricks.’

‘Oh, you are a brick all right, Mr Taynton,’ said the boy. ‘I could stand a cartload of you.’

Mr Taynton, like his laugh, was comfortable and middle-aged. Solicitors are supposed to be sharpfaced and fox-like, but his face was well-furnished and comely, and his rather bald head beamed with benevolence and dinner.

‘My dear boy,’ he said, ‘and it is your birthday — I cannot honour either you or this wonderful port more properly than by drinking your health in it.’

He began and finished his glass to the health he had so neatly proposed, and Morris laughed.

‘Thank you very much,’ he said. ‘Mother, do send the port round. What an inhospitable woman!’

Mrs Assheton rose.

‘I will leave you to be more hospitable than me, then, dear,’ she said. ‘Shall we go, Madge? Indeed, I am afraid you must, if you are to catch the train to Falmer.’

Madge Templeton got up with her hostess, and the two men rose too. She had been sitting next to Morris, and the boy looked at her eagerly.

‘It’s too bad, your having to go,’ he said. ‘But do you think I may come over tomorrow, in the afternoon some time, and

see you and Lady Templeton? ‘

Madge paused a moment.

‘I am so sorry,’ she said, ‘but we shall be away all day. We shan’t be back till quite late.’

‘Oh, what a bore,’ said he, ‘and I leave again on Friday. Do let me come and see you off then.’

But Mrs Assheton interposed.

‘No, dear,’ she said, ‘I am going to have five minutes’ talk with Madge before she goes and we don’t want you. Look after Mr Taynton. I know he wants to talk to you and I want to talk to Madge.’

Mr Taynton, when the door had closed behind the ladies, sat down again with a rather obvious air of proposing to enjoy himself. It was quite true that he had a few pleasant things to say to Morris, it is also true that he immensely appreciated the wonderful port which glowed, ruby-like, in the nearly full decanter that lay to his hand. And, above all, he, with his busy life, occupied for the most part in innumerable small affairs, revelled in the sense of leisure and serene smoothness which permeated Mrs Assheton’s house. He was still a year or two short of sixty, and but for his very bald and shining head would have seemed younger, so fresh was he in complexion, so active, despite a certain reassuring corpulency, was he in his movements. But when he dined quietly like this, at Mrs Assheton’s, he would willingly have sacrificed the next five years of his life if he could have been assured on really reliable authority — the authority for instance of the Recording Angel — that in five years’ time he would be able to sit quiet and not work any more. He wanted very much to be able to take a passive instead of an active interest in life, and this a few hundreds of pounds a year in addition to his savings would enable him to do. He saw, in fact, the goal arrived at which he would be able to sit still and wait with serenity and calmness for the event which would certainly relieve him of all further

material anxieties. His very active life, the activities of which were so largely benevolent, had at the expiration of fifty-eight years a little tired him. He coveted the leisure which was so nearly his.

Morris lit a cigarette for himself, having previously passed the wine to Mr Taynton.

‘I hate port,’ he said, ‘but my mother tells me this is all right. It was laid down the year I was born by the way. You don’t mind my smoking, do you?’

This, to tell the truth, seemed almost sacrilegious to Mr Taynton, for the idea that tobacco, especially the frivolous cigarette, should burn in a room where such port was being drunk was sheer crime against human and divine laws. But he could scarcely indicate to his host that he should not smoke in his own dining-room.

‘No, my dear Morris,’ he said, ‘but really you almost shock me, when you prefer tobacco to this nectar, I assure you nectar. And the car, now, tell me more about the car.’

Morris laughed.

‘I’m so deeply thankful I haven’t overdrawn,’ he said. ‘Oh, the car’s a clipper. We came down from Haywards Heath the most gorgeous pace. I saw one policeman trying to take my number, but we raised such a dust, I don’t think he can have been able to see it. It’s such rot only going twenty miles an hour with a clear straight road ahead.’

Mr Taynton sighed, gently and not unhappily.

‘Yes, yes, my dear boy, I so sympathise with you,’ he said. ‘Speed and violence is the proper attitude of youth, just as strength with a more measured pace, is the proper gait for older folk. And that, I fancy, is just what Mrs Assheton felt. She would feel it to be as unnatural in you to care to drive with her in her very comfortable victoria as she would feel it to be unnatural in herself to wish to go in your lightning speed motor. And that reminds me. As your trustee—’

Coffee was brought in at this moment, carried, not by one of the discreet parlour-maids, but by a young man-servant.