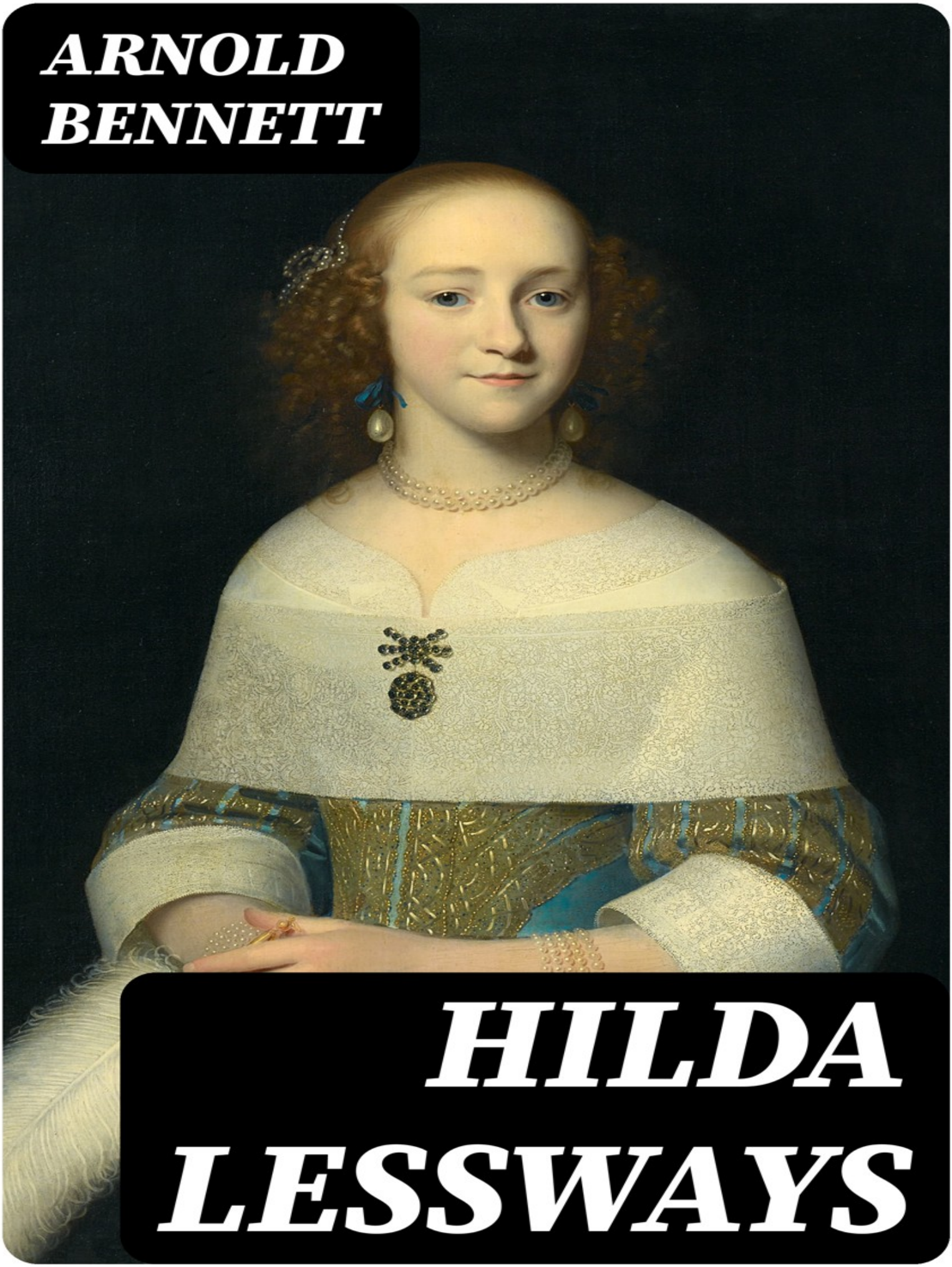
ARNOLD BENNETT



HILDA LESSWAYS

Arnold Bennett

Hilda Lessways

EAN 8596547403906

DigiCat, 2022
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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.

II

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. 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.

III

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 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

suited to the occasion, used the word again and again as she narrated afresh for Hilda the history of the stroke.

“Yes,” she said, “they came and fetched me out of my bed at three o’clock this morning; and would you believe me, though he couldn’t hardly speak, the money and this here book was all waiting in his desk, and he would have me come with it! And him sixty-seven! He always was like that. And I do believe if he’d been paralysed on both sides instead of only all down his right side, and speechless too, he’d ha’ made me understand as I must come here at two o’clock. If I’m a bit late it’s because I was kept at home with my son Enoch; he’s got a whitlow that’s worrying the life out of him, our Enoch has.”

Mrs. Lessways warmly deprecated any apology for inexactitude, and wiped her sympathetic eyes.

“It’s all over with father,” Mrs. Grant resumed. “Doctor hinted to me quiet-like as he’d never leave his bed again. He’s laid himself down for the rest of his days.... And he’d been warned! He’d had warnings. But there!...”

Mrs. Grant contemplated with solemn gleeful satisfaction the overwhelming grandeur of the disaster that had happened to her father. The active old man, a continual figure of the streets, had been cut off in a moment from the world and condemned for life to a mattress. She sincerely imagined herself to be filled with proper grief; but an aesthetic appreciation of the theatrical effectiveness of the misfortune was certainly stronger in her than any other feeling. Observing that Mrs. Lessways wept, she also drew out a handkerchief.

“I’m wishful for you to count the money,” said Mrs. Grant. “I wouldn’t like there to be any—”

“Nay, that I’ll not!” protested Mrs. Lessways.

Mrs. Grant’s pressing duties necessitated her immediate departure. Mrs. Lessways ceremoniously insisted on her leaving by the front door.

“I don’t know where you’ll find another rent-collector that’s worth his salt—in this town,” observed Mrs. Grant, on the doorstep. “I can’t think *what* you’ll do, Mrs. Lessways!”

“I shall collect my rents myself,” was the answer.

When Mrs. Grant had crossed the road and taken the bricked path leading to the paralytic’s house, Mrs. Lessways slowly shut the door and bolted it, and then said to Hilda:

“Well, my girl, I do think you might have tried to show just a little more feeling!”

They were close together in the narrow lobby, of which the heavy pulse was the clock’s ticking.

Hilda replied:

“You surely aren’t serious about collecting those rents yourself, are you, mother?”

“Serious? Of course I’m serious!” said Mrs. Lessways.

II

“Why shouldn’t I collect the rents myself?” asked Mrs. Lessways.

This half-defiant question was put about two hours later. In the meantime no remark had been made about the rents. Mother and daughter were now at tea in the sitting-room. Hilda had passed the greater part of those two hours upstairs in her bedroom, pondering on her mother’s preposterous notion of collecting the rents herself. Alone, she would invent conversations with her mother, silencing the foolish woman with unanswerable sarcastic phrases that utterly destroyed her illogical arguments. She would repeat these phrases, repeat even entire conversations, with pleasure; and, dwelling also with pleasure upon her grievances against her mother, would gradually arrive at a state of dull-glowing resentment. She could, if she chose, easily free her brain from the obsession either by reading or by a sharp jerk of volition; but often she preferred not to do

so, saying to herself voluptuously: “No, I *will* nurse my grievance; I’ll nurse it and nurse it and nurse it! It is mine, and it is just, and anybody with any sense at all would admit instantly that I am absolutely right.” Thus it was on this afternoon. When she came to tea her face was formidably expressive, nor would she attempt to modify the rancour of those uncompromising features. On the contrary, as soon as she saw that her mother had noticed her condition, she deliberately intensified it.

Mrs. Lessways, who was incapable of sustained thought, and who had completely forgotten and recalled the subject of the cottage-rents several times since the departure of Mrs. Grant, nevertheless at once diagnosed the cause of the trouble; and with her usual precipitancy began to repulse an attack which had not even been opened. Mrs. Lessways was not good at strategy, especially in conflicts with her daughter. She was an ingenuous, hasty thing, and much too candidly human. And not only was she deficient in practical common sense and most absurdly unable to learn from experience, but she had not even the wit to cover her shortcomings by resorting to the traditional authoritativeness of the mother. Her brief, rare efforts to play the mother were ludicrous. She was too simply honest to acquire stature by standing on her maternal dignity. By a profound instinct she wistfully treated everybody as an equal, as a fellow-creature; even her own daughter. It was not the way to come with credit out of the threatened altercation about rent-collecting.

As Hilda offered no reply, Mrs. Lessways said reproachfully:

“Hilda, you’re too bad sometimes!” And then, after a further silence: “Anyhow, I’m quite decided.”

“Then what’s the good of talking about it?” said the merciless child.

“But *why* shouldn’t I collect the rents myself? I’m not asking you to collect them. And I shall save the five per

cent., and goodness knows we need it."

"You're more likely to lose twenty-five per cent.," said Hilda. "I'll have some more tea, please."

Mrs. Lessways was quite genuinely scandalized. "You needn't think I shall be easy with those Calder Street tenants, because I shan't! Not me! I'm more likely to be too hard!"

"You'll be too hard, and you'll be too easy, too," said Hilda savagely. "You'll lose the good tenants and you'll keep the bad ones, and the houses will all go to rack and ruin, and then you'll sell all the property at a loss. That's how it will be. And what shall you do if you're not feeling well, and if it rains on Monday mornings?"

Hilda could conceive her mother forgetting all about the rents on Monday morning, or putting them off till Monday afternoon on some grotesque excuse. Her fancy heard the interminable complainings, devisings, futile resolvings, of the self-appointed collector. It was impossible to imagine a woman less fitted by nature than her mother to collect rents from unthrifty artisans such as inhabited Calder Street. The project sickened her. It would render the domestic existence an inferno.

As for Mrs. Lessways, she was shocked, for her project had seemed very beautiful to her, and for the moment she was perfectly convinced that she could collect rents and manage property as well as anyone. She was convinced that her habits were regular, her temper firm and tactful, and her judgment excellent. She was more than shocked; she was wounded. She wept, as she pushed forward Hilda's replenished cup.

"You ought to take shame!" she murmured weakly, yet with certitude.

"Why?" said Hilda, feigning simplicity. "What have I said? *I* didn't begin. You asked me. I can't help what I think."

"It's your tone," said Mrs. Lessways grievously.

III

Despite all Hilda’s terrible wisdom and sagacity, this remark of the foolish mother’s was the truest word spoken in the discussion. It was Hilda’s tone that was at the root of the evil. If Hilda, with the intelligence as to which she was secretly so complacent, did not amicably rule her mother, the unavoidable inference was that she was either a clumsy or a wicked girl, or both. She indeed felt dimly that she was a little of both. But she did not mind. Sitting there in the small, familiar room, close to the sewing-machine, the steel fender, the tarnished chandelier, and all the other daily objects which she at once detested and loved, sitting close to her silly mother who angered her, and yet in whom she recognized a quality that was mysteriously precious and admirable, staring through the small window at the brown, tattered garden-plot where blackened rhododendrons were swaying in the October blast, she wilfully bathed herself in grim gloom and in an affectation of despair.

Somehow she enjoyed the experience. She had only to tighten her lips—and she became oblivious of her clumsiness and her cruelty, savouring with pleasure the pain of the situation, clasping it to her! Now and then a thought of Mr. Skellorn’s tragedy shot through her brain, and the tenderness of pity welled up from somewhere within her and mingled exquisitely with her dark melancholy. And she found delight in reading her poor mother like an open book, as she supposed. And all the while her mother was dreaming upon the first year of Hilda’s life, before she had discovered that her husband’s health was as unstable as his character, and comparing the reality of the present with her early illusions. But the clever girl was not clever enough to read just that page.

“We ought to be everything to each other,” said Mrs. Lessways, pursuing her reflections aloud.

Hilda hated sentimentalism. She could not stand such talk.

“And you know,” said Hilda, speaking very frigidly and with even more than her usual incisive clearness of articulation, “it’s not your property. It’s only yours for life. It’s my property.”

The mother’s mood changed in a moment.

“How do you know? You’ve never seen your father’s will.” She spoke in harsh challenge.

“No; because you’ve never let me see it.”

“You ought to have more confidence in your mother. Your father had. And I’m trustee and executor.” Mrs. Lessways was exceedingly jealous of her legal position, whose importance she never forgot nor would consent to minimize.

“That’s all very well, for you,” said Hilda; “but if the property isn’t managed right, I may find myself slaving when I’m your age, mother. And whose fault will it be?... However, I shall—”

“You will what?”

“Nothing.”

“I suppose her ladyship will be consulting her own lawyer next!” said Mrs. Lessways bitterly.

They looked at each other. Hilda’s face flushed to a sombre red. Mrs. Lessways brusquely left the room. Then Hilda could hear her rattling fussily at the kitchen range. After a few minutes Hilda followed her to the kitchen, which was now nearly in darkness. The figure of Mrs. Lessways, still doing nothing whatever with great vigour at the range, was dimly visible. Hilda approached her, and awkwardly touched her shoulder.

“Mother!” she demanded sharply; and she was astonished by her awkwardness and her sharpness.

“Is that you?” her mother asked, in a queer, foolish tone.

They kissed. Such a candid peacemaking had never occurred between them before. Mrs. Lessways, as simple in forgiveness as in wrath, did not disguise her pleasure in the

remarkable fact that it was Hilda who had made the overture. Hilda thought: “How strange I am! What is coming over me?” She glanced at the range, in which was a pale gleam of red, and that gleam, in the heavy twilight, seemed to her to be inexpressibly, enchantingly mournful. And she herself was mournful about the future— very mournful. She saw no hope. Yet her sadness was beautiful to her. And she was proud.

Chapter 3
Mr. Cannon

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I

A little later Hilda came downstairs dressed to go out. Her mother was lighting a glimmer of gas in the lobby. Ere Mrs. Lessways could descend from her tiptoes to her heels and turn round Hilda said quickly, forestalling curiosity:

"I'm going to get that thread you want. Just give me some money, will you?"

Nobody could have guessed from her placid tone and indifferent demeanour that she was in a state of extreme agitation. But so it was. Suddenly, after kissing her mother in the kitchen, she had formed a tremendous resolve. And in a moment the resolve had possessed her, sending her flying upstairs, and burning her into a fever, as with the assured movements of familiarity she put on her bonnet, mantle, 'fall,' and gloves in the darkness of the chamber. She held herself in leash while her mother lifted a skirt and found a large loaded pocket within and a purse in the pocket and a sixpence in the purse. But when she had shut the door on all that interior haunted by her mother's restlessness, when she was safe in the porch and in the windy obscurity of the street, she yielded with voluptuous apprehension to a thrill that shook her.

"I might have tidied my hair," she thought. "Pooh! What does my hair matter?"

Her mind was full of an adventure through which she had passed seven years previously, when she was thirteen and a little girl at school. For several days, then, she had been ruthlessly mortifying her mother by complaints about the

meals. Her fastidious appetite could not be suited. At last, one noon when the child had refused the whole of a plenteous dinner, Mrs. Lessways had burst into tears and, slapping four pennies down on the table, had cried, “Here! I fairly give you up! Go out and buy your own dinner! Then perhaps you’ll get what you want!” And the child, without an instant’s hesitation, had seized the coins and gone out, hatless, and bought food at a little tripe-shop that was also an eating-house, and consumed it there; and then in grim silence returned home. Both mother and daughter had been stupefied and frightened by the boldness of the daughter’s initiative, by her amazing, flaunting disregard of filial decency. Mrs. Lessways would not have related the episode to anybody upon any consideration whatever. It was a shameful secret, never even referred to. But Mrs. Lessways had unmistakably though indirectly referred to it when in anger she had said to her daughter aged twenty: “I suppose her ladyship will be consulting her own lawyer next!” Hilda had understood, and that was why she had blushed.

And now, as she turned from Lessways Street into the Oldcastle Road, on her way to the centre of the town, she experienced almost exactly the intense excitement of the reckless and supercilious child in quest of its dinner. The only difference was that the recent reconciliation had inspired her with a certain negligent compassion for her mother, with a curious tenderness that caused her to wonder at herself.

II

The Market Square of Turnhill was very large for the size of the town. The diminutive town hall, which in reality was nothing but a watch-house, seemed to be a mere incident on its irregular expanse, to which the two-storey shops and dwellings made a low border. Behind this crimson, blue-

slated border rose the loftier forms of a church and a large chapel, situate in adjacent streets. The square was calm and almost deserted in the gloom. It typified the slow tranquillity of the bailiwick, which was removed from the central life of the Five Towns, and unconnected therewith by even a tram or an omnibus. Only within recent years had Turnhill got so much as a railway station—rail-head of a branch line. Turnhill was the extremity of civilization in those parts. Go northwards out of this Market Square, and you would soon find yourself amid the wild and hilly moorlands, sprinkled with iron-and-coal villages whose red-flaming furnaces illustrated the eternal damnation which was the chief article of their devout religious belief. And in the Market Square not even the late edition of the *Staffordshire Signal* was cried, though it was discreetly on sale with its excellent sporting news in a few shops. In the hot and malodorous candle-lit factories, where the real strenuous life of the town would remain cooped up for another half-hour of the evening, men and women had yet scarcely taken to horse-racing; they would gamble upon rabbits, cocks, pigeons, and their own fists, without the mediation of the *Signal*. The one noise in the Market Square was the bell of a hawker selling warm pikelets at a penny each for the high tea of the tradesmen. The hawker was a deathless institution, a living proof that withdrawn Turnhill would continue always to be exactly what it always had been. Still, to the east of the Square, across the High Street, a vast space was being cleared of hovels for the erection of a new town hall daringly magnificent.

Hilda crossed the Square, scorning it.

She said to herself: “I’d better get the thing over before I buy the thread. I should never be able to stand Miss Dayson’s finicking! I should scream out!” But the next instant, with her passion for proving to herself how strong she could be, she added: “Well, I just *will* buy the thread first!” And she went straight into Dayson’s little fancy shop, which was full of counter and cardboard boxes and Miss

Dayson, and stayed therein for at least five minutes, emerging with a miraculously achieved leisureliness. A few doors away was a somewhat new building, of three storeys —the highest in the Square. The ground floor was an ironmongery; it comprised also a side entrance, of which the door was always open. This side entrance showed a brass-plate, “Q. Karkeek, Solicitor.” And the wire-blinds of the two windows of the first floor also bore the words: “Q. Karkeek, Solicitor. Q. Karkeek, Solicitor.” The queerness of the name had attracted Hilda’s attention several years earlier, when the signs were fresh. It was an accident that she had noticed it; she had not noticed the door-plates or the wire-blinds of other solicitors. She did not know Mr. Q. Karkeek by sight, nor even whether he was old or young, married or single, agreeable or repulsive.

The side entrance gave directly on to a long flight of naked stairs, and up these stairs Hilda climbed into the unknown, towards the redoubtable and the perilous. “I’m bound to be seen,” she said to herself, “but I don’t care, and I *don’t* care!” At the top of the stairs was a passage, at right angles, and then a glazed door with the legend in black letters, “Q. Karkeek, Solicitor,” and two other doors mysteriously labelled “Private.” She opened the glazed door, and saw a dirty middle-aged man on a stool, and she said at once to him, in a harsh, clear, deliberate voice, without giving herself time to reflect:

“I want to see Mr. Karkeek.”

The man stared at her sourly, as if bewildered.

She said to herself: “I shan’t be able to stand this excitement much longer.”

“You can’t see Mr. Karkeek,” said the man. “Mr. Karkeek’s detained at Hanbridge County Court. But if you’re in such a hurry like, you’d better see Mr. Cannon. It’s Mr. Cannon as they generally do see. Who d’ye come from, miss?”

“Come from?” Hilda repeated, unnerved.

“What name?”

She had not expected this. “I suppose I shall have to tell him!” she said to herself, and aloud: “Lessways.”

“Oh! Ah!” exclaimed the man. “Bless us! Yes!” It was as if he had said: “Of course it’s Lessways! And don’t I know all about *you!*” And Hilda was overwhelmed by the sense of the enormity of the folly which she was committing.

The man swung half round on his stool, and seized the end of an india-rubber tube which hung at the side of the battered and littered desk, just under a gas-jet. He spoke low, like a conspirator, into the mouthpiece of the tube. “Miss Lessways—to see you, sir.” Then very quickly he clapped the tube to his ear and listened. And then he put it to his mouth again and repeated: “Lessways.” Hilda was agonized.

“I’ll ask ye to step this way, miss,” said the man, slipping off his stool. At the same time he put a long inky penholder, which he had been holding in his wrinkled right hand, between his teeth.

“Never,” thought Hilda as she followed the clerk, in a whirl of horrible misgivings, “never have I done anything as mad as this before! I’m under twenty-one!”

III

There she was at last, seated in front of a lawyer in a lawyer’s office—her ladyship consulting her own lawyer! It seemed incredible! A few minutes ago she had been at home, and now she was in a world unfamiliar and alarming. Perhaps it was a pity that her mother had unsuspectingly put the scheme into her head!

However, the deed was done. Hilda generally acted first and reflected afterwards. She was frightened, but rather by the unknown than by anything she could define.

“You’ve come about the property?” said Mr. Cannon amiably, in a matter-of-fact tone.

He had deep black eyes, and black hair, like Hilda's; good, regular teeth, and a clear complexion; perhaps his nose was rather large, but it was straight. With his large pale hands he occasionally stroked his long soft moustache; the chin was blue. He was smartly dressed in dark blue; he had a beautiful neck-tie, and the genuine whiteness of his wristbands was remarkable in a district where starched linen was usually either grey or bluish. He was not a dandy, but he respected his person; he evidently gave careful attention to his body; and this trait alone set him apart among the citizens of Turnhill.

"Yes," said Hilda. She thought: "He's a very handsome man! How strange I don't remember seeing him in the streets!" She was in awe of him. He was indefinitely older than herself; and she felt like a child, out of place in the easy-chair.

"I suppose it's about the rent-collecting?" he pursued.

"Yes—it is," she answered, astonished that he could thus divine her purpose. "I mean—"

"What does your mother want to do?"

"Oh!" said Hilda, speaking low. "It's not mother. I've come to consult you myself. Mother doesn't know. I'm nearly twenty-one, and it's really my property, you know!" She blushed with shame.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. He tried to disguise his astonishment in an easy, friendly smile. But he was most obviously startled. He looked at Hilda in a different way, with a much intensified curiosity.

"Yes," she resumed. He now seemed to her more like a fellow-creature, and less like a member of the inimical older generation.

"So you're nearly twenty-one?"

"In December," she said. "And I think under my father's will—" She stopped, at a loss. "The fact is, I don't think mother will be quite able to look after the property properly,

and I’m afraid—you see, now that Mr. Skellorn has had this stroke—”

“Yes,” said Mr. Cannon, “I heard about that, and I was thinking perhaps Mrs. Lessways had sent you.... We collect rents, you know.”

“I see!” Hilda murmured. “Well, the truth is, mother hasn’t the slightest idea I’m here. Not the slightest! And I wouldn’t hurt her feelings for anything.” He nodded sympathetically. “But I thought something ought to be done. She’s decided to collect our Calder Street rents herself, and she isn’t fitted to do it. And then there’s the question of the repairs.... I know the rents are going down. I expect it’s all mother’s for life, but I want there to be something left for me when she’s gone, you see! And if—I’ve never seen the will. I suppose there’s no way of seeing a copy of it, somewhere?... I can’t very well ask mother again.”

“I know all about the will,” said Mr. Cannon.

“You do?”

Wondrous, magical man!

“Yes,” he explained. “I used to be at Toms and Scoles’s. I was there when it was made. I copied it.”

“Really!” She felt that he would save her, not only from any possible unpleasant consequences of her escapade, but also from suffering ultimate loss by reason of her mother’s foolishness.

“You’re quite right,” he continued. “I remember it perfectly. Your mother is what we call tenant-for-life; everything goes to you in the end.”

“Well,” Hilda asked abruptly. “All I want to know is, what I can do.”

“Of course, without upsetting your mother?”

He glanced at her. She blushed again.

“Naturally,” she said coldly.

“You say you think the property is going down—it *is*, everybody knows that—and your mother thinks of collecting

the rents herself.... Well, young lady, it's very difficult, very difficult, your mother being the trustee and executor."

"Yes, that's what she's always saying—she's the trustee and executor."

"You'd better let me think it over for a day or two."

"And shall I call in again?"

"You might slip in if you're passing. I'll see what can be done. Of course it would never do for you to have any difficulty with your mother."

"Oh no!" she concurred vehemently. "Anything would be better than that. But I thought there was no harm in me—"

"Certainly not."

She had a profound confidence in him. And she was very content so far with the result of her adventure.

"I hope nobody will find out I've been here," she said timidly. "Because if it *did* get to mother's ears—"

"Nobody will find out," he reassured her.

Assuredly his influence was tranquillizing. Even while he insisted on the difficulties of the situation, he seemed to be smoothing them away. She was convinced that he would devise some means of changing her mother's absurd purpose and of strengthening her own position. But when, at the end of the interview, he came round the large table which separated them, and she rose and looked up at him, close, she was suddenly very afraid of him. He was a tall and muscular man, and he stood like a monarch, and she stood like a child. And his gesture seemed to say: "Yes, I know you are afraid. And I rather like you to be afraid. But I am benevolent in the exercise of my power." Under his gaze, her gaze fastened on the wire-blind and the dark window, and she read off the reversed letters on the blind.

Like a mouse she escaped to the stairs. She was happy and fearful and expectant.... It was done! She had consulted a lawyer! She was astounded at herself.

In the Market Square it was now black night. She looked shyly up at the lighted wire-blinds over the ironmongery. "I

was there!” she said. “He is still there.” The whole town, the whole future, seemed to be drenched now in romance. Nevertheless, the causes of her immense discontent had not apparently been removed nor in any way modified.