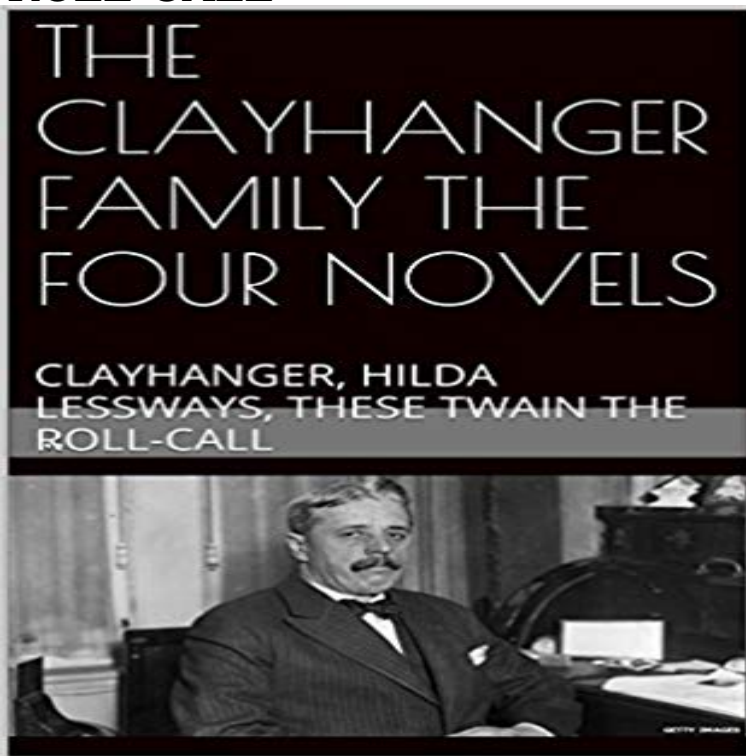


# THE CLAYHANGER FAMILY THE FOUR NOVELS: CLAYHANGER, HILDA LESSWAYS, THESE TWAIN THE ROLL-CALL



The Clayhanger Family is a series of novels by Arnold Bennett, published between 1910 and 1918. Though the series is commonly referred to as a trilogy, it actually consists of four books; the first three novels were released in one single volume as *The Clayhanger Family* in 1925. *Clayhanger* (1910) [The novels are a coming-of-age story set in the Midlands of Victorian England, following Edwin Clayhanger as he leaves school, takes over the family business, and falls in love. Begun in 1910, written partly at the Royal Albion Hotel, Brighton and in Lausanne. The books are set in Bennetts usual setting of the 5 Towns, a thinly-disguised version of the six towns of the Potteries which amalgamated (at the time of which Bennett was writing) into the borough (and later city) of Stoke-on-Trent. Buildings described in the novels are still identifiable in Burslem (which is the fictional Bursley) Clayhangers father supported his extremely poor family even during his early childhood, and rose to become one of the key men in the Five Towns. Clayhanger is not fully aware of his fathers history, and therefore rather takes for granted much of his familys affluence and influence. Clayhanger allows his ambition to become an architect to be overruled by his domineering father, Darius, and becomes instead an unwilling (and underpaid) office junior in his fathers printing business. He does mildly revolt against his father and his family. While he is capable of seeing through the many hypocrisies of Victorian England, he does not confront them or become his own man until his fathers final illness and death hand him control of his business. The triumph of the book, then, is not in outlining Edwins escape from the respectable bourgeoisie, but in detailing its effect on his life, and his submission to it. In one of the earlier chapters in the book, Bennett writes that Edwin had only heard of a philosopher as someone who made the

best of a bad job and in some ways that is what Edwin has to do in the book - survive under a stifling layer of conduct imposed by his father, his church and the society he is part of. Although his friendship with the Orgreave family provide intellectual stimulation, they are as much part of 5 Towns life as anyone; this is why Edwin ends up rejecting the unspoken offer of Janet Orgreave as partner, and falls instead for the less attractive, impoverished but exotic Hilda Lessways. Hilda Lessways (1911) The second book was Hilda Lessways, which paralleled Edwin Clayhangers story from the point of view of his eventual wife, Hilda. It tells the story from her coming of age, her working experiences as a shorthand clerk and keeper of a lodging house in London and Brighton, her relationship with George Cannon that ends in her disastrous bigamous marriage and pregnancy, and finally her reconciliation with Edwin Clayhanger. In part a re-telling of the plot of Clayhanger, the book includes some scenes from the earlier book from Hildas perspective. These Twain (1916) These Twain, the third in the Clayhanger series, chronicles the married life of Edwin and Hilda. Edwin, now released from the controlling influence of his father, finds himself free to run his business and his life, a freedom that is diminished by his wifes caprices. Edwin does not enjoy an entirely happy marriage with Hilda. She does not conform to the periods stereotype of a submissive wife - which is, of course, partly why Edwin married her. It is also suggested - although according to the conventions of the time it is not stated - that the marriage is based on sexual compatibility, and as a result its problems are outside the bedroom. Hilda, who is rescued from virtual destitution by Edwin through their marriage, and who already has a child, is not a figure of passive gratitude, and has opinions on matters - such as Edwins business - which would normally be a wholly male preserve. Edwin has his doubts about their union, and is

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