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# **Mr. Prohack**

Arnold Bennett

# Imprint

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**MR. PROHACK**

**BY**

**ARNOLD BENNETT**

**AUTHOR OF "CLAYHANGER," ETC.**



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## CHAPTER I

### THE NEW POOR

#### I

Arthur Charles Prohack came downstairs at eight thirty, as usual, and found breakfast ready in the empty dining-room. This pleased him, because there was nothing in life he hated more than to be hurried. For him, hell was a place of which the inhabitants always had an eye on the clock and the clock was always further advanced than they had hoped.

The dining-room, simply furnished with reproductions of chaste Chippendale, and chilled to the uncomfortable low temperature that hardy Britons pretend to enjoy, formed part of an unassailably correct house of mid-Victorian style and antiquity; and the house formed part of an unassailably correct square just behind Hyde Park Gardens. (Taxi-drivers, when told the name of the square, had to reflect for a fifth of a second before they could recall its exact situation.)

Mr. Prohack was a fairly tall man, with a big head, big features, and a beard. His characteristic expression denoted benevolence based on an ironic realisation of the humanity of human nature. He was forty-six years of age and looked it. He had been for more than twenty years at the Treasury, in which organism he had now attained a certain importance. He was a Companion of the Bath. He exulted in the fact that the Order of the Bath took precedence of those bumptious Orders, Star of India, St. Michael and St. George, Indian Empire, Royal Victorian and British Empire; but he laughed at his wife for so exulting. If the matter happened to be mentioned he would point out that in the table of precedence Companions of the Bath ranked immediately below Masters in Lunacy.

He was proud of the Treasury's war record. Other departments of State had swollen to amazing dimensions during the war. The

Treasury, while its work had been multiplied a hundredfold, had increased its personnel by only a negligible percentage. It was the cheapest of all the departments, the most efficient, and the most powerful. The War Office, the Admiralty, and perhaps one other department presided over by a personality whom the Prime Minister feared, did certainly defy and even ignore the Treasury. But the remaining departments (and especially the "mushroom ministries") might scheme as much as they liked,—they could do nothing until the Treasury had approved their enterprises. Modest Mr. Prohack was among the chief arbiters of destiny for them. He had daily sat in a chair by himself and approved or disapproved according to his conscience and the rules of the Exchequer; and his fiats, in practice, had gone forth as the fiats of the Treasury. Moreover he could not be bullied, for he was full of the sense that the whole constitution and moral force of the British Empire stood waiting to back him. Scarcely known beyond the Treasury, within the Treasury he had acquired a reputation as "the terror of the departments." Several times irritated Ministers or their high subordinates had protested that the Treasury's (Mr. Prohack's) passion for rules, its demands for scientific evidence, and its sceptical disposition were losing the war. Mr. Prohack had, in effect retorted: "Departmentally considered, losing the war is a detail." He had retorted: "Wild cats will not win the war." And he had retorted: "I know nothing but my duty."

In the end the war was not lost, and Mr. Prohack reckoned that he personally, by the exercise of courage in the face of grave danger, had saved to the country five hundred and forty-six millions of the country's money. At any rate he had exercised a real influence over the conduct of the war. On one occasion, a chief being absent, he had had to answer a summons to the Inner Cabinet. Of this occasion he had remarked to his excited wife: "They were far more nervous than I was."

Despite all this, the great public had never heard of him. His portrait had never appeared in the illustrated papers. His wife's portrait, as "War-worker and wife of a great official," had never appeared in the illustrated papers. No character sketch of him had ever been printed. His opinions on any subject had never been telephonically or otherwise demanded by the editors of up-to-date

dailies. His news-value indeed was absolutely nil. In *Who's Who* he had only four lines of space.

Mr. Prohack's breakfast consisted of bacon, dry toast, coffee, marmalade, *The Times* and *The Daily Picture*. The latter was full of brides and bridegrooms, football, enigmatic murder trials, young women in their fluffy underclothes, medicines, pugilists, cinema stars, the biggest pumpkin of the season, uplift, and inspired prophecy concerning horses and company shares; together with a few brief unillustrated notes about civil war in Ireland, famine in Central Europe, and the collapse of realms.



## II

"Ah! So I've caught you!" said his wife, coming brightly into the room. She was a buxom woman of forty-three. Her black hair was elaborately done for the day, but she wore a roomy peignoir instead of a frock; it was Chinese, in the Imperial yellow, inconceivably embroidered with flora, fauna, and grotesques. She always thus visited her husband at breakfast, picking bits off his plate like a bird, and proving to him that her chief preoccupation was ever his well-being and the satisfaction of his capricious tastes.

"Many years ago," said Mr. Prohack.

"You make a fuss about buying *The Daily Picture* for me. You say it humiliates you to see it in the house, and I don't know what. But I catch you reading it yourself, and before you've opened *The Times!* Dear, dear! That bacon's a cinder and I daren't say anything to her."

"Lady," replied Mr. Prohack, "we all have something base in our natures. Sin springs from opportunity. I cannot resist the damned paper." And he stuck his fork into the fair frock-coat of a fatuous bridegroom coming out of church.

"My fault again!" the wife remarked brightly.

The husband changed the subject:

"I suppose that your son and daughter are still asleep?"

"Well, dearest, you know that they were both at that dance last night."

"They ought not to have been. The popular idea that life is a shimmy is a dangerous illusion." Mr. Prohack felt the epigram to be third-rate, but he carried it off lightly.

"Sissie only went because Charlie wanted to go, and all I can say is that it's a nice thing if Charlie isn't to be allowed to enjoy himself now the war's over — after all he's been through."

"You're mixing up two quite different things. I bet that if Charlie committed murder you'd go into the witness-box and tell the judge he'd been wounded twice and won the Military Cross."

"This is one of your pernickety mornings."

"Seeing that your debauched children woke me up at three fifteen—!"

"They woke me up too."

"That's different. You can go to sleep again. I can't. You rather like being wakened up, because you take a positively sensual pleasure in turning over and going to sleep again."

"You hate me for that."

"I do."

"I make you very unhappy sometimes, don't I?"

"Eve, you are a confounded liar, and you know it. You have never caused me a moment's unhappiness. You may annoy me. You may exasperate me. You are frequently unspeakable. But you have never made me unhappy. And why? Because I am one of the few exponents of romantic passion left in this city. My passion for you transcends my reason. I am a fool, but I am a magnificent fool. And the greatest miracle of modern times is that after twenty-four years of marriage you should be able to give me pleasure by perching your stout body on the arm of my chair as you are doing."

"Arthur, I'm not stout."

"Yes, you are. You're enormous. But hang it, I'm such a morbid fool I like you enormous."

Mrs. Prohack, smiling mysteriously, remarked in a casual tone, as she looked at *The Daily Picture*:

"Why *do* people let their photographs get into the papers? It's awfully vulgar."

"It is. But we're all vulgar to-day. Look at that!" He pointed to the page. "The granddaughter of a duke who refused the hand of a princess sells her name and her face to a firm of ship-owners who

keep newspapers like their grandfathers kept pigeons.... But perhaps I'm only making a noise like a man of fifty."

"You aren't fifty."

"I'm five hundred. And this coffee is remarkably thin."

"Let me taste it."

"Yes, you'd rob me of my coffee now!" said Mr. Prohack, surrendering his cup. "Is it thin, or isn't it? I pride myself on living the higher life; my stomach is not my inexorable deity; but even on the mountain top which I inhabit there must be a limit to the thinness of the coffee."

Eve (as he called her, after the mother and prototype of all women—her earthly name was Marian) sipped the coffee. She wrinkled her forehead and then glanced at him in trouble.

"Yes, it's thin," she said. "But I've had to ration the cook. Oh, Arthur, I *am* going to make you unhappy after all. It's impossible for me to manage any longer on the housekeeping allowance."

"Why didn't you tell me before, child?"

"I have told you 'before,'" said she. "If you hadn't happened to mention the coffee, I mightn't have said anything for another fortnight. You started to give me more money in June, and you said that was the utmost limit you could go to, and I believed it was. But it isn't enough. I hate to bother you, and I feel ashamed—"

"That's ridiculous. Why should you feel ashamed?"

"Well, I'm like that."

"You're revelling in your own virtuousness, my girl. Now in last week's *Economist* it said that the Index Number of commodity prices had slightly fallen these last few weeks."

"I don't know anything about indexes and the *Economist*," Eve retorted. "But I know what coffee is a pound, and I know what the tradesmen's books are—"

At this point she cried without warning.

"No," murmured Mr. Prohack, soothingly, caressingly. "You mustn't baptise me. I couldn't bear it." And he kissed her eyes.



### III

"I *know* we can't afford any more for housekeeping," she whispered, sniffing damply. "And I'm ashamed I can't manage, and I knew I should make you unhappy. What with idle and greedy working-men, and all these profiteers...! It's a shame!"

"Yes," said Mr. Prohack. "It's what our Charlie fought for, and got wounded twice for, and won the M.C. for. That's what it is. But you see we're the famous salaried middle-class that you read so much about in the papers, and we're going through the famous process of being crushed between the famous upper and nether millstones. Those millstones have been approaching each other—and us—for some time. Now they've begun to nip. That funny feeling in your inside that's causing you still to baptise me, in spite of my protest—that's the first real nip."

She caught her breath.

"Arthur," she said. "If you go on like that I shall scream."

"Do," Mr. Prohack encouraged her. "But of course not too loud. At the same time don't forget that I'm a humourist. Humourists make jokes when they're happy, and when they're unhappy they make jokes."

"But it's horribly serious."

"Horribly."

Mrs. Prohack slipped off the arm of the chair. Her body seemed to vibrate within the Chinese gown, and she effervesced into an ascending and descending series of sustained laughs.

"That's hysteria," said Mr. Prohack. "And if you don't stop I shall be reluctantly compelled to throw the coffee over you. Water would be better, but there is none."

Then Eve ceased suddenly.

"To think," she remarked with calmness, "that you're called the Terror of the Departments, and you're a great authority on finance,

and you've been in the Government service for nearly twenty-five years, and always done your duty —"

"Child," Mr. Prohack interrupted her. "Don't tell me what I know. And try not to be surprised at any earthly phenomena. There are people who are always being astonished by the most familiar things. They live on earth as if they'd just dropped from Mars on to a poor foreign planet. It's not a sign of commonsense. You've lived on earth now for—shall we say?—some twenty-nine or thirty years, and if you don't know the place you ought to. I assure you that there is nothing at all unusual in our case. We are perfectly innocent; we are even praiseworthy; and yet—we shall have to suffer. It's quite a common case. You've read of thousands and millions of such cases; you've heard of lots personally; and you've actually met a few. Well, now, you yourself *are* a case. That's all."

Mrs. Prohack said impatiently:

"I consider the Government's treated you shamefully. Why, we're much worse off than we were before the war."

"The Government has treated me shamefully. But then it's treated hundreds of thousands of men shamefully. All Governments do."

"But we have a position to keep up!"

"True. That's where the honest poor have the advantage of us. You see, we're the dishonest poor. We've been to the same schools and universities and we talk the same idiom and we have the same manners and like the same things as people who spend more in a month or a week than we spend in a year. And we pretend, and they pretend, that they and we are exactly the same. We aren't, you know. We're one vast pretence. Has it occurred to you, lady, that we've never possessed a motor-car and most certainly never shall possess one? Yet look at the hundreds of thousands of cars in London alone! And not a single one of them ours! This detail may have escaped you."

"I wish you wouldn't be silly, Arthur."

"I am not silly. On the contrary, my real opinion is that I'm the wisest man you ever met in your life—not excepting your son! It remains that we're a pretence. A pretence resembles a bladder. It

may burst. We probably shall burst. Still, we have one great advantage over the honest poor, who sometimes have no income at all; and also over the rich, who never can tell how big their incomes are going to be. *We know exactly where we are.* We know to the nearest sixpence."

"I don't see that that helps us. I consider the Government has treated you shamefully. I wonder you important men in the Treasury haven't formed a Trade Union before now."

"Oh, Eve! After all you've said about Trade Unions this last year! You shock me! We shall never be properly treated until we do form a Trade Union. But we shall never form a Trade Union, because we're too proud. And we'd sooner see our children starve than yield in our pride. That's a fact."

"There's one thing — we can't move into a cheaper house."

"No," Mr. Prohack concurred. "Because there isn't one."

Years earlier Mr. Prohack had bought the long lease of his house from the old man who, according to the logical London system, had built the house upon somebody else's land on the condition that he paid rent for the land and in addition gave the house to the somebody else at the end of a certain period as a free gift. By a payment of twelve pounds per annum Mr. Prohack was safe for forty years yet and he calculated that in forty years the ownership of the house would be a matter of some indifference both to him and to his wife.

"Well, as you're so desperately wise, perhaps you'll kindly tell me what we *are* to do."

"I might borrow money on my insurance policy — and speculate," said Mr. Prohack gravely.

"Oh! Arthur! Do you really think you —" Marian showed a wild gleam of hope.

"Or I might throw the money into the Serpentine," Mr. Prohack added.

"Oh! Arthur! I could kill you. I never know how to take you."

"No, you never do. That's the worst of a woman like you marrying a man like me."

They discussed devices. One servant fewer. No holiday. Cinemas instead of theatres. No books. No cigarettes. No taxis. No clothes. No meat. No telephone. No friends. They reached no conclusion. Eve referred to Adam's great Treasury mind. Adam said that his great Treasury mind should function on the problem during the day, and further that the problem must be solved that very night.

"I'll tell you one thing I shall do," said Mrs. Prohack in a decided tone as Mr. Prohack left the table. "I shall countermand Sissie's new frock."

"If you do I shall divorce you," was the reply.

"But why?"

Mr. Prohack answered:

"In 1917 I saw that girl in dirty overalls driving a thundering great van down Whitehall. Yesterday I met her in her foolish high heels and her shocking openwork stockings and her negligible dress and her exposed throat and her fur stole, and she was so delicious and so absurd and so futile and so sure of her power that—that—well, you aren't going to countermand any new frock. That chit has the right to ruin me—not because of anything she's done, but because she *is*. I am ready to commit peccadilloes, but not crimes. Good morning, my dove."

And at the door, discreetly hiding her Chinese raiment behind the door, Eve said, as if she had only just thought of it, though she had been thinking of it for quite a quarter of an hour:

"Darling, there's your clubs."

"What about my clubs?"

"Don't they cost you a lot of money?"

"No. Besides I lunch at my clubs—better and cheaper than at any restaurant. And I shouldn't have time to come home for lunch."

"But do you need two clubs?"

"I've always belonged to two clubs. Every one does."

"But why *two*?"

"A fellow must have a club up his sleeve."