

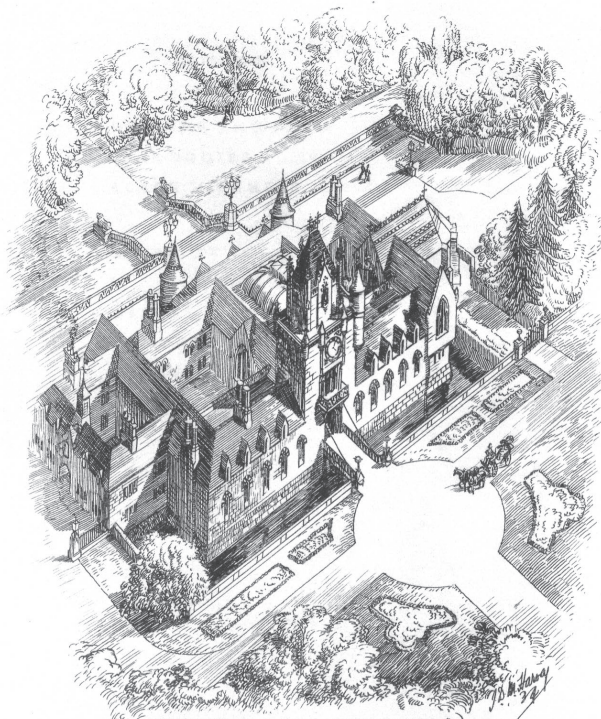


EVELYN
WAUGH

—
A HANDFUL
OF DUST

PENGUIN CLASSICS

A Handful of Dust



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EVELYN
WAUGH

*A Handful
of Dust*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY PHILIP EADE



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'... I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.'

The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot

Introduction

A Handful of Dust was Evelyn Waugh's fourth novel and remained his favourite until *Brideshead Revisited* a decade later. As usual, he wrote very quickly, completing most of the manuscript over a period of two months spent at Fez in Morocco at the beginning of 1934. It was published later that year when he was still only thirty and, although not universally acclaimed by the critics at the time, it has since come to be widely regarded as his best book, and one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century English literature.

The novel grew out of a short story he had written the previous year during an expedition to British Guiana and Brazil (recounted in his travel book *Ninety-Two Days*), while stranded at the remote town of Boa Vista in the Amazon basin, forlornly waiting for a trade boat to take him back to civilization. 'Goodness the boredom of Boa Vista', Waugh wrote to his friend Diana Cooper after being stuck at the ramshackle settlement for a week. But, as so often with Waugh, boredom eventually gave way to a burst of creativity, and on 15 February 1933 he sent his agent what he described as 'a grade A short story', which his diary shows had been

finished a mere two days after he first thought of the plot for it.

The identity of this story has never been proven beyond doubt. The most likely contender is 'The Man Who Liked Dickens', the macabre tale of an Englishman who joins an expedition to Brazil in a bid to win back his unfaithful wife, and ends up being trapped on an isolated ranch with an illiterate settler and made to read the novels of Charles Dickens to his captor day after day for the rest of his life.

The idea for this story, Waugh later wrote, had come to him 'quite naturally' from his visit, shortly before arriving at Boa Vista, to a reclusive, very religious and manifestly unhinged rancher named Mr Christie and 'reflecting how easily he could hold me prisoner' – a line of thought characteristic of the comic darkness of Waugh's imagination.

'The Man Who Liked Dickens' also drew inspiration from Waugh's difficult relationship with his theatrically inclined father Arthur, managing director of Chapman & Hall which published both Dickens and Waugh. Night after night, the self-styled 'Dickensian' Arthur Waugh would sit in the book-room of their family home in Hampstead reading aloud from Dickens, a painful memory for his son Evelyn which had been revived by his enforced return to his parents' home after the humiliating break-up of his first marriage to Evelyn Gardner in 1929, and more recently by the ant-eaten pile of Dickens novels he had found at a Jesuit mission a few days

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before reaching Boa Vista. There were echoes, too, of Waugh's readings of P. G. Wodehouse at his former wife's bedside after she fell ill on honeymoon – before she admitted that she hated being read to by him.

After the story was published in an American magazine (*Hearst's International and Cosmopolitan*) in September 1933, Waugh kept turning the idea over in his mind. 'I wanted to discover how the prisoner got there,' he later explained, 'and eventually the thing grew into a study of other sorts of savage at home and the civilized man's helpless plight among them.' Hence, Waugh wrote, *A Handful of Dust* 'began at the end'.

The 'civilized man' in the novel is Tony Last, the decent but naive squire of Hetton Abbey, his hideous Gothic Revival country house where there is 'not a glazed brick or encaustic tile' that is not dear to his heart. The home-grown 'savages' – a label that Waugh applied with less irony to the increasingly uncivilized (as he saw them) citizens of modern Britain than he did to the 'remote people' he met on his travels abroad – are his bored and casually adulterous wife Lady Brenda, whom the dependable Tony has 'got into the habit of loving and trusting', and her sponging young lover John Beaver, memorably described by Waugh on his first arrival at Hetton as being 'so seldom wholly welcome anywhere that he was not sensitive to the slight constraint of his welcome'.

Like Waugh's first three novels – *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies* and

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Black Mischief – *A Handful of Dust* is firmly rooted in the author's own experience, drawing on his profound bitterness over his wife's flagrant infidelity after barely a year of marriage, coupled with the more recent heartache of his unrequited love for Teresa 'Baby' Jungman, who had finally turned him down shortly before he sailed for British Guiana.

However, Waugh was now attempting something more serious and disturbing than his earlier surreal black comedies, as signalled by the title he eventually took from the ominous stanza in T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land': 'And I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / I will show you fear in a handful of dust'.

In January 1934, shortly after beginning work on *A Handful of Dust*, he wrote to Katharine Asquith from Fez: 'I peg away at the novel which seems to me faultless of its kind. Very difficult to write because for the first time I am trying to deal with normal people instead of eccentrics. Comic English character parts too easy when one gets to be thirty.' In early February he told her: 'The novel drags on at 10,000 words a week. I have just killed a little boy at a lawn meet & made his mother commit adultery & his father get drunk so perhaps you won't like it after all.'

Every so often Waugh sent instalments back to his agent A. D. Peters in London to be typed up. While still undecided how

it would end, he told Peters that the ending might possibly be the same as that of 'The Man Who Liked Dickens', which eventually it was, bar the necessary name changes and a few other minor alterations. But, because that story had already been published in *Hearst's*, when *Harper's Bazaar* first published the novel as a five-part serial under the title 'A Flat in London', they asked Waugh to write a different final chapter.

In this version, which he dubbed 'the happy ending', later republished as a stand-alone short story 'By Special Request', and subsequently appended to the 1964 edition of *A Handful of Dust*, Tony takes himself off for a lazy few months' island hopping in the West Indies, his trip deemed 'the correct procedure' in the circumstances, 'a convention hallowed in fiction and history by generations of disillusioned husbands'. He returns to find Brenda abandoned by Beaver but expecting a baby and hoping to be taken back by her husband. But Tony has grown more worldly and less passive while away and although he goes along with the appearance of reconciliation, he decides to secretly keep the flat in May-fair on, his hesitant conversation with Mrs Beaver indicating that he now intends to use this as a trysting place of his own:

'You know,' said Tony, 'I've been thinking. It's a rather a useful thing to have – a flat of that kind.'

'It is necessary,' said Mrs Beaver.

'Exactly. Well I think I shall keep it on. The only trouble is that my wife is inclined to fret about the rent. My idea

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is to use it when I come to London instead of my club. It will be cheaper and a great deal more convenient. But my wife may not see it in that light . . . in fact . . .’

‘I quite understand.’

‘I think it would be better if my name didn’t appear on that board downstairs.’

‘Naturally. A number of my tenants are taking the same precaution.’

It may well be, as Selina Hastings suggests, that the Tony Last in this alternative ending was ‘the personification of the man Waugh would like to be, the betrayed husband who can shrug off his betrayal, remain invulnerable to his wife, and take a flat in Mayfair in which to conduct his affairs’. Yet for Waugh, Tony’s nightmarish and ostensibly fanciful fate in *A Handful of Dust* was in many ways more true to life.

When the book was eventually published with the Amazonian ending – the racially offensive language of which hasn’t aged well – Waugh’s friend Henry Yorke (the novelist Henry Green) was among those who found this:

so fantastic that it throws the rest out of proportion. Aren’t you mixing two things together? The first part of the book is convincing, a real picture of people one has met and may at any moment meet again. Then comes the perfectly feasible, very moving, & beautifully written death of that

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horrible little boy after which the family breaks up. Then the father goes abroad with that very well drawn horror Messinger. That too is splendid & I've no complaints. But then to let Tony be detained by some madman introduces an entirely fresh note & we are in phantasy with a ph at once. I was terrified towards the end by thinking you would let him die of fever which to my mind would have been false but what you did do to him was far far worse. It seemed manufactured & not real.

Apparently unflustered by his friend's concerns, Waugh replied:

Very many thanks for your letter of criticism. You must remember that to me the savages come into the category of 'people one has met and may at any moment meet again'. I think they appear fake to you largely because you don't really believe they exist . . . I think I agree that the Todd episode is fantastic. It is a 'conceit' in the Webster manner – wishing to bring Tony to a sad end I made it an elaborate & improbable one. I think too the sentimental episode with Terese in the ship is probably a mistake. But the Amazon stuff had to be there. The scheme was a Gothic man in the hands of savages – first Mrs Beaver etc. then the real ones, finally the silver foxes at Hetton. All that quest for a city seems to me justifiable symbolism.

Some have accused Waugh of disingenuity here, deeming it more plausible that he had simply tacked 'The Man Who Loved Dickens' onto his unfinished novel about adultery as an ingenious and characteristically economical means of solving the problem of its ending. However, as we have seen, by Waugh's account at least, this gets the genesis of the novel the wrong way round (it 'began at the end'), and there seems to be no very good reason for not taking the author at his word on how the book came together.

In any event, the Webster conceit, inspired by the dark and elaborately metaphorical Jacobean plays of John Webster, had evidently been in Waugh's mind as early as February, when the book was still only half-finished and he wrote to Diana Cooper that it was 'rather like Webster in modern idiom'. Waugh's 'Gothic man' Tony Last displays attitudes of mind belonging to a bygone age, personified by his beloved Hetton, formerly one of the notable houses in the county until its neo-Gothic rebuilding/ruination in 1864. Like Hetton, Last is ill-equipped for modern life. Insulated by his protective home environment, he is too innocent to realize that anything is amiss in his marriage.

In common with Waugh's previous self-parodying protagonists such as Paul Pennyfeather and Adam Fenwick-Symes, Last's naivety and tolerance renders him vulnerable to his wife's brazen betrayal. And with all these innocents, not least Last, Waugh took great pains to show

how cleverly and suddenly Fate could destroy them. At the end of his travel book *Labels*, written in the immediate aftermath of his own marriage break-up, Waugh had declared: 'Fortune is that least capricious of deities and arranges things on the just and rigid system that no one shall be very happy for very long.' Hence the premonition of coming trouble when near the beginning of *A Handful of Dust* Jock Grant-Menzies says to John Beaver: 'I often think Tony Last's one of the happiest men I know. He's got just enough money, loves the place, one son he's crazy about, devoted wife, not a worry in the world.'

Waugh had himself felt like one of the happiest men he knew in the run up to the implosion of his marriage. His career as a novelist had taken off and no great concerns, quarrels or estrangements preceded his wife's defection. 'As far as I knew we were both serenely happy,' he told his parents in the letter relaying 'the sad & to me radically shocking news that Evelyn has gone to live with a man called Heygate' (the BBC news editor John Heygate, who, when cited in the Waugh's divorce proceedings, was forced to resign; Heygate served as the model for Ginger Littlejohn in *Vile Bodies* and for John Beaver in *A Handful of Dust* – albeit having nothing much in common with Beaver beyond cuckoldry).

One momentous conclusion Waugh drew from his personal calamity was set out in another letter to his brother Alec. 'The trouble with the world today is that there's not

enough religion in it. There's nothing to stop young people doing whatever they feel like doing at the moment.'

Waugh had himself spent most of the past decade 'as near to an atheist as one could be', as he put it. The break-up of his marriage finally persuaded him that life was 'unintelligible and unendurable without God'. Western civilization, he concluded, owed its entire existence to Christianity, and Christianity in turn seemed to exist in its 'most complete and vital form' in the Roman Catholic Church – hence his decision to convert to Catholicism. His conversion was a cause of great anguish to his staunchly Anglican parents as it seemed to extinguish any hope of his marrying again and giving them grandchildren, given the Catholic attitude to divorce.

Religion, and specifically Anglicanism, is portrayed in *A Handful of Dust* as either an irrelevance or something to be made fun of. Tony is teased by Brenda for 'posing as an upright God-fearing gentleman of the old school' whose thoughts constantly drift during Sunday services. The congregation is indifferent to the elderly Rev Tendril's sermons, composed 'in his more active days for delivery in the garrison chapel' in India, and invariably concluding 'with some reference to homes and dear ones far away'. But among the underlying themes of the novel is that Tony's lack of religious faith leaves him doubly exposed to the cruel workings of fate.

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In an article shortly after the Second World War, Waugh wrote that *A Handful of Dust* 'dealt entirely with behaviour' and contained 'all I had to say about humanism'. It was thus, he maintained, 'vastly' less ambitious than the religiously themed *Brideshead Revisited*. It is nonetheless now widely considered a better book and demonstrates, perhaps more than any of his other novels, Waugh's remarkable clarity and economy as a writer and his extraordinary delicacy at switching between the funny, the sad and the sinister.

Philip Eade

A HANDFUL OF DUST

One

DU CÔTÉ DE CHEZ BEAVER

‘Was anyone hurt?’

‘No one I am thankful to say,’ said Mrs Beaver, ‘except two housemaids who lost their heads and jumped through a glass roof into the paved court. They were in no danger. The fire never reached the bedrooms I am afraid. Still, they are bound to need doing up, everything black with smoke and drenched in water and luckily they had that old-fashioned sort of extinguisher that ruins *everything*. One really cannot complain. The chief rooms were *completely* gutted and everything was insured. Sylvia Newport knows the people. I must get on to them this morning before that ghoul Mrs Shutter snaps them up.’

Mrs Beaver stood with her back to the fire, eating her morning yoghurt. She held the carton close under her chin and gobbled with a spoon.

‘Heavens, how nasty this stuff is. I wish you’d take to it, John. You’re looking so tired lately. I don’t know how I should get through my day without it.’

‘But, mumsy, I haven’t as much to do as you have.’

‘That’s true, my son.’

John Beaver lived with his mother at the house in Sussex Gardens where they had moved after his father’s death. There was little in it to suggest the austere elegant interiors which Mrs Beaver planned for her customers. It was crowded with the unsaleable furniture of two larger houses, without pretension to any period, least of all to the present. The best pieces and those which had sentimental interest for Mrs Beaver were in the L shaped drawing room upstairs.

Beaver had a dark little sitting room (on the ground floor, behind the dining room) and his own telephone. The elderly parlourmaid looked after his clothes. She also dusted, polished and maintained in symmetrical order on his dressing table and on the top of his chest of drawers, the collection of sombre and bulky objects that had stood in his father’s dressing room; indestructible presents for his wedding and twenty-first birthday, ivory, brass bound, covered in pigskin, crested and gold mounted, suggestive of expensive Edwardian masculinity – racing flasks and hunting flasks, cigar cases, tobacco jars, jockeys, elaborate meerschaum pipes, button hooks and hat brushes.

There were four servants, all female and all, save one, elderly.

When anyone asked Beaver why he stayed there instead of setting up on his own, he sometimes said that he thought

his mother liked having him there (in spite of her business she was lonely); sometimes that it saved him at least five pounds a week.

His total income varied around six pounds a week, so this was an important saving.

He was twenty-five years old. From leaving Oxford until the beginning of the slump he had worked in an advertising agency. Since then no one had been able to find anything for him to do. So he got up late and sat near his telephone most of the day, hoping to be rung up.

Whenever it was possible, Mrs Beaver took an hour off in the middle of the morning. She was always at her shop punctually at nine, and by half past eleven she needed a break. Then, if no important customer was imminent, she would get into her two-seater and drive home to Sussex Gardens. Beaver was usually dressed by then and she had grown to value their morning interchange of gossip.

‘What was your evening?’

‘Audrey rang up at eight and asked me to dinner. Ten of us at the Embassy, rather dreary. Afterwards we all went on to a party given by a woman called de Trommet.’

‘I know who you mean. American. She hasn’t paid for the toile-de-jouy chaircovers we made her last April. I had a dull time too; didn’t hold a card all the evening and came away four pounds ten to the bad.’

'Poor mumsy.'

'I'm lunching at Viola Chasm's. What are you doing? I didn't order anything here I'm afraid.'

'Nothing so far. I can always go round to Brat's.'

'But that's so expensive. I'm sure if we ask Chambers she'll be able to get you something in. I thought you were certain to be out.'

'Well, I still may be. It isn't twelve yet.'

(Most of Beaver's invitations came to him at the last moment; occasionally even later, when he had already begun to eat a solitary meal from a tray . . . 'John, darling, there's been a muddle and Sonia has arrived without Reggie. Could you be an angel and help me out? Only be quick, because we're going in now' . . . Then he would go headlong for a taxi and arrive, with apologies, after the first course . . . One of his few recent quarrels with his mother had occurred when he left a luncheon party of hers in this way.)

'Where are you going for the week-end?'

'Hetton.'

'Who's that? I forget.'

'Tony Last.'

'Yes, of course. She's lovely, he's rather a stick. I didn't know you knew them.'

'Well, I don't really. Tony asked me in Brat's the other night. He may have forgotten.'

'Send a telegram and remind them. It is far better than

ringing up. It gives them less chance to make excuses. Send it tomorrow just before you start. They owe me for a table.'

'What's their dossier?'

'I used to see her quite a lot before she married. She was Brenda Rex, Lord St Cloud's daughter, very fair, underwater look. People used to be mad about her when she was a girl. Everyone thought she would marry Jock Grant-Menzies at one time. Wasted on Tony Last, he's a prig. I should say it was time she began to be bored. They've been married five or six years. Quite well off but everything goes in keeping up the house. I've never seen it but I've an idea it's huge and quite hideous. They've got one child at least, perhaps more.'

'Mumsy, you are wonderful. I believe you know about everyone.'

'It's a great help. All a matter of paying attention while people are talking.'

Mrs Beaver smoked a cigarette and then drove back to her shop. An American woman bought two patchwork quilts at thirty guineas each, Lady Metroland telephoned about a bathroom ceiling, an unknown young man paid cash for a cushion; in the intervals between these events, Mrs Beaver was able to descend to the basement where two dispirited girls were packing lampshades. It was cold down there in spite of a little oil stove, and the walls were always damp. The girls were becoming quite deft, she noticed with pleasure, particularly the shorter one who was handling the crates like a man.

'That's the way,' she said, 'you are doing very nicely, Joyce. I'll soon get you on to something more interesting.'

'Thank you, Mrs Beaver.'

They had better stay in the packing department for a bit, Mrs Beaver decided; as long as they would stand it. They had neither of them enough chic to work upstairs. Both had paid good premiums to learn Mrs Beaver's art.

Beaver sat on beside his telephone. Once it rang and a voice said, 'Mr Beaver? Will you please hold the line, sir, Mrs Tipping would like to speak to you.'

The intervening silence was full of pleasant expectation. Mrs Tipping had a luncheon party that day, he knew; they had spent some time together the evening before and he had been particularly successful with her. Someone had chucked . . .

'Oh, Mr Beaver, I am so sorry to trouble you. I was wondering, could you possibly tell me the name of the young man you introduced to me last night at Madame de Trommet's? The one with the reddish moustache. I think he was in Parliament.'

'I expect you mean Jock Grant-Menzies.'

'Yes, that's the name. You don't by any chance know where I can find him, do you?'

'He's in the book but I don't suppose he'll be at home now. You might be able to get him at Brat's at about one. He's almost always there.'

'Jock Grant-Menzies, Brat's Club. Thank you so very much. It is kind of you. I hope you will come and see me some day. Good-bye.'

After that the telephone was silent.

At one o'clock Beaver despaired. He put on his overcoat, his gloves, his bowler hat and with neatly rolled umbrella set off to his club, taking a penny bus as far as the corner of Bond Street.

The air of antiquity pervading Brat's, derived from its elegant Georgian façade and finely panelled rooms, was entirely spurious, for it was a club of recent origin, founded in the burst of bonhomie immediately after the war. It was intended for young men, to be a place where they could straddle across the fire and be jolly in the card room without incurring scowls from older members. But now these founders were themselves passing into middle age; they were heavier, balder and redder in the face than when they had been demobilized, but their joviality persisted and it was their turn now to embarrass their successors, deploring their lack of manly and gentlemanly qualities.

Six broad backs shut Beaver from the bar. He settled in one of the armchairs in the outer room and turned over the pages of the *New Yorker*, waiting until someone he knew should turn up.

Jock Grant-Menzies came upstairs. The men at the bar

greeted him saying, 'Hullo, Jock old boy, what are you drinking?' or, more simply, 'Well, old boy?' He was too young to have fought in the war but these men thought he was all right; they liked him far more than they did Beaver, who, they thought, ought never to have got into the club at all. But Jock stopped to talk to Beaver. 'Well, old boy,' he said. 'What are you drinking?'

'Nothing so far.' Beaver looked at his watch. 'But I think it's time I had one. Brandy and ginger ale.'

Jock called to the barman and then said:

'Who was the old girl you wished on me at that party last night?'

'She's called Mrs Tipping.'

'I thought she might be. That explains it. They gave me a message downstairs that someone with a name like that wanted me to lunch with her.'

'Are you going?'

'No, I'm no good at lunch parties. Besides I decided when I got up that I'd have oysters here.'

The barman came with the drinks.

'Mr Beaver, sir, there's ten shillings against you in my books for last month.'

'Ah, thank you, Macdougall, remind me sometime, will you?'

'Very good, sir.'

Beaver said, 'I'm going to Hetton tomorrow.'

'Are you now? Give Tony and Brenda my love.'

'What's the form?'

'Very quiet and enjoyable.'

'No paper games?'

'Oh, no, nothing like that. A certain amount of bridge and backgammon and low poker with the neighbours.'

'Comfortable?'

'Not bad. Plenty to drink. Rather a shortage of bathrooms. You can stay in bed all the morning.'

'I've never met Brenda.'

'You'll like her, she's a grand girl. I often think Tony Last's one of the happiest men I know. He's got just enough money, loves the place, one son he's crazy about, devoted wife, not a worry in the world.'

'Most enviable. You don't know anyone else who's going, do you? I was wondering if I could get a lift down there.'

'I don't, I'm afraid. It's quite easy by train.'

'Yes, but it's more pleasant by road.'

'And cheaper.'

'Yes, and cheaper I suppose . . . well, I'm going down to lunch. You won't have another?'

Beaver rose to go.

'Yes, I think I will.'

'Oh, all right. Macdougall. Two more, please.'

Macdougall said, 'Shall I book them to you, sir?'

'Yes, if you will.'

Later, at the bar, Jock said, 'I made Beaver pay for a drink.'

'He can't have liked that.'

'He nearly died of it. Know anything about pigs?'

'No. Why?'

'Only that they keep writing to me about them from my constituency.'

Beaver went downstairs but before going into the dining room he told the porter to ring up his home and see if there was any message for him.

'Mrs Tipping rang up a few minutes ago and asked whether you could come to luncheon with her today.'

'Will you ring her up and say that I shall be delighted to, but that I may be a few minutes late?'

It was just after half past one when he left Brat's and walked at a good pace towards Hill Street.