

An Autumn Encounter

For yet another mile or two the hot dusty road runs through level fields, till it reaches yonder shoulder of the downs, already golden three-parts up with ripening corn. Thitherwards lies my inevitable way; and now that home is almost in sight it seems hard that the last part of the long day's sweltering and delightful tramp must needs be haunted by that hateful speck, black on the effulgence of the slope. Did I not know he was only a scarecrow, the thing might be in a way companionable: a pleasant suggestive surmise, piquing curiosity, gilding this last weary stage with some magic of expectancy. But I passed close by him on my way out. Early as I was, he was already up and doing, eager to introduce himself. He leered after me as I swung down the road, -- mimicked my gait, as it seemed, in a most uncalled-for way; and when I looked back, he was blowing derisive kisses of farewell with his empty sleeve.

I had succeeded, however, in shaking off the recollection between the morning's start and now; so it was annoying that he should force himself on me, just when there was no getting rid of him. At this distance, however, he might be anything. An indeterminate blot, it seems to waver, to falter, to come and vanish again in the quivering, heated air. Even so, in the old time, leaning on that familiar gate -- are the tell-tale inwoven initials still decipherable? -- I used to watch Her pacing demurely towards me through the corn. It was ridiculous, it was fatuous, under all the circumstances it was

monstrous, and yet{...}! We were both under twenty, so She was She, and I was I, and there were only we three the wide world over, she and I and the unbetraying gate. Porta eburnea! False visions alone sped through you, though Cupid was wont to light on your topmost bar, and preen his glowing plumes. And to think that I should see her once more, coming down the path as if not a day had passed, hesitating as of old, and then -- but surely her ankles seem -- Confound that scarecrow!...

His sex is by this time painfully evident; also his condition in life, which is as of one looking back on better days. And now he is upon a new tack. Though here on the level it is still sultry and airless, an evening breeze is playing briskly along the slope where he stands, and one sleeve saws the air violently; the other is pointed stiffly heavenwards. It is all plain enough, my poor friend! The sins of the world are a heavy burden and a grievous unto you. You have a mission, you must testify; it will forth, in season and out of season. For man, he wakes and sleeps and sins betimes: but crows sin steadily, without any cessation. And this unhappy state of things is your own particular business. Even at this distance I seem to hear you rasping it: ``Salvation, damnation, damnation, salvation!" And the jolly earth smiles in the perfect evenglow, and the corn ripples and laughs all round you, and one young rook (only fledged this year, too!), after an excellent simulation of prostrate, heart-broken penitence, soars joyously away, to make love to his neighbour's wife. ``Salvation, damnation, damn -- " A shifty wriggle of the road, and he is

transformed once more. Flung back in an ecstasy of laughter, holding his lean sides, his whole form writhes with the chuckle and gurgle of merriment. Ho, ho! what a joke it was! How I took you all in! Even the rooks! What a joke is everything, to be sure!

Truly, I shall be glad to get quit of this heartless mummer.

Fortunately I shall soon be past him. And now, behold! the old dog waxes amorous. Mincing, mowing, empty sleeve on hollow breast, he would fain pose as the most irresistible old hypocrite that ever paced a metropolitan kerb. "Love, you young dogs," he seems to croak, "Love is the one thing worth living for! Enjoy your present, rooks and all, as I do!" Why, indeed, should he alone be insensible to the golden influence of the hour? More than one supple waist (alas! for universal masculine frailty!) has been circled by that tattered sleeve in days gone by; a throbbing heart once beat where sodden straw now fails to give a manly curve to the chest. Why should the coat survive, and not a particle of the passion that inspired it long ago?

At last I confront him, face to face: and the villain grins recognition, completely unabashed. Nay, he cocks his eye with a significant glance under the slouch of his shapeless hat, and his arm points persistently and with intelligence up the road. My good fellow, I know the way to the Dog and Duck as well as you do: I was going there anyhow, without your officious interference -- and the beer, as you justly remark, is unimpeachable. But was this really all you've been trying to say to me, this last half-hour? Well, well!