

THE RETURN

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The Return by Walter de La Mare

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BY

WALTER DE LA MARE

AUTHOR OF "HENRY BROCKEN," ETC.

"Look not for roses in Attalus his garden, or wholesome flowers in a venomous plantation. And since there is scarce any one bad, but some others are the worse for him; tempt not contagion by proximity, and hazard not thyself in the shadow of corruption."—
SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

LONDON
EDWARD ARNOLD

1910

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CHAPTER I

THE churchyard in which Arthur Lawford found himself wandering that mild and golden September afternoon was old, green, and refreshingly still. The silence in which it lay seemed as keen and mellow as the light—the pale, almost heatless, sunlight that filled the air. Here and there robins sang across the stones, elvishly shrill in the peace of harvest. The only other living creature there seemed to Lawford to be his own rather fair, not unsubstantial, rather languid self, who at the noise of the birds had raised his head and glanced as if between content and incredulity across his still and solitary surroundings. An increasing inclination for such lonely ramblings, together with the feeling that his continued ill-health had grown a little irksome to his wife, and that now that he was really better she would be relieved at his absence, had induced him to wander on from home without much considering where the quiet lanes were leading him. And in spite of a peculiar melancholy that had welled up into his mind during these last few days, he had

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certainly smiled with a faint sense of the irony of things on lifting his eyes in an unusually depressed moodiness to find himself looking down on the shadows and peace of Widderstone. With that anxious irresolution which illness so often brings in its train he had hesitated for what must have been some few minutes before actually entering the graveyard. But once safely within he had begun to feel extremely loth to think of turning back again, and this not the less at remembering with a real foreboding that it was now drawing towards evening, that another day was nearly done. He trailed his umbrella behind him over the grass-grown paths; staying here and there to read some time-worn inscription; stooping a little broodingly over the dark green graves. Not for the first time during the long, laborious convalescence that had followed apparently so slight an indisposition, a fleeting sense almost as if of an unintelligible remorse had overtaken him, a vague thought that behind all these past years, hidden as it were from his success, lay something not yet quite reckoned with. How often as a boy had he been rapped into a galvanic activity out of those deep reveries he used to fall into—those fits of a kind of fishlike day-dream. How often, and even far beyond boyhood, had he found himself bent on some distant thought or fleeting vision that the sudden clash of self-possession had made to seem quite illusory, and yet had left so strangely haunting. And now the old habit had stirred out of its long sleep, and, through the gate that Influenza in departing had left ajar, had returned upon him.

“But I suppose we are all pretty much the same,

if we only knew it," he had consoled himself. "We keep our crazy side to ourselves; that's all. We just go on for years and years doing and saying whatever happens to come up—and really keen about it too"—he had glanced up with a kind of challenge in his face at the squat little belfry—"and then, without the slightest reason or warning, down you go, and it all begins to wear thin, and you get wondering what on earth it all means." Memory slipped back for an instant to the life that in so unusual a fashion seemed to have floated a little aloof. Fortunately he had not discussed these inward symptoms with his wife. How surprised Sheila would be to see him loafing in this old, crooked churchyard! How she would lift her dark eyebrows, with that handsome, indifferent tolerance! He smiled, but a little confusedly; yet the thought gave even a spice of adventure to the evening's ramble.

He loitered on, scarcely thinking at all now, stooping here and there. These faint, listless ideas made no more stir than the sunlight gilding the fading leaves, the crisp turf underfoot. With a slight effort he stooped even once again;—

"Stranger, a moment pause, and stay;
In this dim chamber hidden away
Lies one who once found life as dear
As now he finds his slumber here;
Pray, then, the Judgment but increase
His deep, his everlasting peace!"

"But then, how do you know lie you at peace?"
Lawford audibly questioned, gazing at the doggerel.

And yet, as his eye wandered over the blunt green stone and the rambling, crimson-berried brier that had almost encircled it with its thorns, the echo of that whisper rather jarred. He was, he supposed, rather a dull creature—at least people seemed to think so—and he seldom felt at ease even with his own small facetiousness. Besides, just that kind of question was getting very common. Now that cleverness was the fashion most people were clever—even perfect fools; and cleverness after all was often only a bore: all head and no body. He turned languidly to the small cross-shaped stone on the other side.

“Here lies the body of Ann Hard, who died in child-bed.
Also of James, her infant son.”

He muttered the words over with a kind of mournful bitterness. “That’s just it—just it; that’s just how it goes!” . . . He yawned softly; the pathway had come to an end. Beyond him lay ranker grass, one and another obscurer mounds, an old scarred oak seat, shadowed by a few everlastingly green cypresses and coral-fruited yew-trees. And above and beyond all hung a pale blue arch of sky with a few voyaging clouds like silvered wool, and the calm, wide curves of stubble field and pasture land. He stood with vacant eyes, not in the least aware how queer a figure he made with his gloves and his umbrella and his hat among the stained and tottering gravestones. Then, just to linger out his hour, and half sunken in reverie, he walked slowly over to the few solitary graves beneath the cypresses.

One only was commemorated with a tombstone, a rather unusual oval-headed stone, carved at each corner into what might be the heads of angels, or of pagan dryads, blindly facing each other with worn-out, sightless faces. A low, curved stone canopy arched over the grave with a crevice so wide between its stones that Lawford actually bent down and slid in his gloved fingers between them. He straightened himself with a sigh, and followed with extreme difficulty the well-nigh, illegible inscription:—

"Here lie ye bones of one,
Nicholas Sabathier, a Stranger to this Parish,
who fell by his own hand on ye
Eve of St. Michael and All Angels. MDCCXXXIX."

Of the date he was a little uncertain. The "hand" had lost its "n" and "d"; and all the "Angels" rain had erased. He was not quite sure even of the "Stranger." There was a great rich "S," and the twisted tail of a "g"; and, whether or no, Lawford smilingly thought, he is no Stranger now. But how rare and how memorable a name! French evidently; probably Huguenot. And the Huguenots, he remembered vaguely, were a rather remarkable "crowd." He had, he thought, even played at "Huguenots" once, with blood immeasurable spilt at twilight. What was the man's name? Coligny; yes, of course, Coligny. "And I suppose," Lawford continued, muttering to himself, "I suppose this poor beggar was put here out of the way. They might, you know," he added confidentially, raising the ferrule of his umbrella, "they might have stuck a