

THE SHADOWY DILL-WATERS

OR

MR. SMUDGE THE MEDIUM

“ ‘Tis like the howling of Irish wolves against the moon.”

As You Like it.

IN our investigation of the trumpery tin Pantheon of Aunt Sallies which our country calls ‘literary gents,’ one of the most striking figures is a certain lame duck that suggests a mixed ancestry of Bringand manqué and the Ghost in the Bab Ballads.

Historically, too, the subject has its advantage, for not only does the work of Weary Willie suggest primal Chaos, but himself recalls the Flood. He seems to have desired to emulate Noah, but the modern tendency to specialisation has led him to confine his attentions to the Insect World, and the remarkable jumping qualities of some of his specimens have their correspondence in the metre of those treacherously emulsions which it is our present purpose to study.

Come with me! Behold the scene of action. What? You can see nothing? Of course not. It’s out of focus, and the limelight is but a farthing dip. Never mind; take the slide, and hold it to the light! Ah! there’s a well—a druid well; a wood—a druid wood; a boat (druid) on a druid sea. Why Druid? Because Willie is not a British workman. The expletive is harmless enough. Look! more wells and woods and boats and apple-blossoms. When in doubt, play apple-blossom. Try and scan it as a dactyl. You can’t? He can.

Oh! there are some people in the boat. Druid people. A queen with hair like the casting-net of the stars. What’s that? Never mind. There’s nothing rude or offensive about the casting-net of the stars? Very good, then; let’s get on. What are they doing? Drifting. That’s dead sure, anyway. Drifting. Drifting. That’s the beautiful Celtic glamour of it. Druidically drifting Druids on a druid sea of apple-blossom in the middle distance. Foreground, a well in a wood. Background, a casting-net of the stars. Dotted about, hounds of various colours, usually red. Let’s have another slide. Same thing, with a fairy floating about. Tired? Yes. Well, sit down and talk about it. Tut! Tut! . . .

How on earth does anybody ever deliberately produce this sort of thing? He doesn’t. It just happens. All the Gregory Powder in the world won’t produce it; it’s true Asiatic Cholera, and you can’t imitate it. I didn’t mean dill-waters; I meant rice-waters.

Now let no one think that we object to an atmosphere in Art. Maeterlinck is doubtless just as misty in his symbolism; equally he uses a leitmotiv; equally he relies on mystery to shroud his figures with fascination, terror, or glamour.

But the images are themselves perfectly clear and precise. In the mistiest of all, “Les Aveugles,” one can condense the plot into a single phrase of simplest English. On this clean model, Greek in its simplicity, the master has thrown draperies of cleanly woven fabric, delicate and frail as spiders’ webs—and as silvery and strong as they.

This is a craftsmanship exquisitely subtle and severe, a style of almost superhuman austerity.

In our shadowy choleraic we have the imitation of this, its reflection in a dull and dirty mind.

Smudge.

When Ruskin reproached Whistler for his ability to distinguish between colours less violent than vermilion and emerald, he was no doubt a Philistine. But how much worse is the Bohemian who thinks—“Since I cannot see anything but muddiness in these silver-grey quarter-tones, I can easily rival Whistler.” Forthwith he mixes up all the colours in his box, daubs a canvas with them and——? Certainly he deceives Ruskin, but he deceives nobody else.

Genius, O weary one, is not an infinite capacity for taking pains; but genius has to take pains to ex-

press itself, and expression is at least half the battle. You, I think, have neither genius nor application; neither a healthy skin nor the soap-travail which might reveal it. Still, one can never be sure; you might give a trial to the soap.

If we had not a sufficiency of hard work before us in interpreting the masters of old, we might be tempted to waste more time on you; but there is Blake. Blake is more obscure than you are; but we have this guarantee, based on experience, that when we do attain to his meaning, it starts up luminous, Titanic, splendid. With you, we discover only commonplace—the commonplace of a maudlin undertaker replying to the toast of the Ladies at the Annual Dinner of the Antique Order of Arch-Druids.

Blake fashioned his intricate caskets of symbol to conceal pearls; you pile up dead leaves to cover rotten apples.

You are Attis with a barren fig-leaf.

It is true that a sort of dreary music runs monotonously through your verses, only jarred by the occasional discords. It is as if an eternal funeral passed along, and the motor-hearse had something wrong with the ignition—and the exhaust.

It is as if a man were lost upon a lonely marsh in the flat country and constantly slipped and sat down with a splash in a puddle. These be ignoble images, my masters!

The fact is that you are both myopic and tone-deaf. You peer into the darkly splendid world, the abyss of light—for it is light, to the seer—and you see but “unintelligible images, unluminous, formless, and void.” Then you return and pose as one who has trodden the eternal snows.

You are like a man who puts a penny into a mutoscope that is out of order; and, rather than admit that he has been swindled, pretends to have enjoyed it. You are like a parvenu with an ill-cooked chop at a swagger restaurant who eats it rather than incur the frown of the waiter.

Better abandon mysticism outright than this. But we suppose it is impossible; you must trim, and compromise, and try to get round the Boyg, O Peer Gynt without his courage and light-heartedness, O onion with many a stinking sheath, and a worm at the heart!

Yes, if nothing else were wrong with you—and everything else *is* wrong—you would still be damned for your toadying to Mrs. Grundy and the Reverend Robert Rats.

We thought to sum you up on a page, and that page a page of but four corners; on mature consideration we think it could be done in a word, and that word a word of but four letters.

A. QUILLER, JR.