

Ida Hauchawout

Theodore Dreiser

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I

SHE is identified in my mind, and always will be somehow, with the country in which I first saw her, a land, as it were, of milk and honey. When I think of her and the dreary, commonplace, brown farm-house, in a doorway of which I first saw her framed, and later of the wee, but cleanly, cabin in which I saw her lying at rest, I think of smooth green hills that rise in noble billows, of valleys so wide and deep that they could hold a thousand cottage farms, of trees that were globe-like from being left unharried by the winds, of cattle red and black and white and black, great herds dotting the hills, and of barns so huge that they looked more like great hangars for flying-machines than storehouses for hay and grain. Yes, everywhere was plenty, rich fields of wheat and corn and rye and oats, with here and there specializing farmers who grew only tomatoes or corn or peas or ran dairies, men who somehow seemed to grow richer than the others.

And then I think of "Fred" Hauchawout, her father, a man who evidently so styled himself, for the name was painted in big black letters over the huge door of his great red barn. This Hauchawout was a rude, crude, bear-like soul, stocky, high-booted, sandy-haired, gray-eyed and red-skinned, as well as inhospitable. He was clad always, on Sunday and every other day, so I heard, in worn brown overalls and jumper. In short, he was one of those dreadful, tramping, laboring grubs who gather and gather and gather, sparing no least grain for pleasure by the way; and having so done, dying and leaving it all to children who have been alienated in youth and care no least whit whether their forebear is alive or dead, nor for anything save the goods which belike he has been able to amass. But in this latter sense Hauchawout was no huge success, either. He was too limited in his ideas to do more than hide or reinvest in land or cattle or bank his moderate earnings at a low rate of interest. He was quoted locally as living up to his assertion that "no enimel gets fet py me," and he was known far and wide for having the thinnest and boniest and hardestworked horses and cows in the neighborhood, from which he extracted the last ounce of labor and the last gill of milk.

He was the father of three sons and two daughters, so I was told, all of whom must have hated him; those I knew did, anyhow. For one of the sons, when first I wandered into the region, had already gone to the far West, after pausing to throw a pitchfork at his father and telling him to go to hell, or so the story went. Another, whom I knew quite well, being a neighbor of a relative of mine, had married after being "turned out," as he said, by "the old man" because he wouldn't work hard enough. And yet he was a good enough worker to take over and pay for a farm of forty acres of fertile land in seven years, also eventually to acquire an automobile, a contraption which his father denounced as "a loafer's buggy."

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The third son, Samuel, had also left his father because of a quarrel over his very human desire to marry and make his own way, a change which his father did not seem to sympathize with. Latterly, because he was greedy like his father and hoped to obtain an undue share of the estate at his death, or so his relatives said, he had made friends with his father, and thereafter exchanged such greetings and visits as two such peculiar souls might enjoy. They were always fighting, the second son told me (the one who had acquired forty acres and an automobile), being friendly one month or so and the next not, moods and differing interests dictating their volatile and varying approaches and understandings.

In addition, there were two daughters, Effie, a woman of twenty–nine or thirty, who at the age of twenty–one had run away to a near–by great city and found work in a laundry never to return, since her father would not let her have a beau; and finally Ida, the subject of this sketch, whom I first saw when she was twenty–eight and already looked much of the care and disappointment with which apparently her life had been freighted. For, besides being hard on "animels," Hauchawout was hard on human beings and seemed to look upon them as mere machines like himself. It was said that he was up at dawn or earlier, with the first crow of his roosters, and the last to go to bed at night. Henry Hauchawout, the son I knew best, once confessed to me that his father would "swear like hell" if all his children were not up within five minutes after he was. His wife, a worn and abused woman, had died at forty–three, and he had never married, but not from loyalty. Did he not have Ida? He had no religion, of course, none other than the need of minding your own business and getting as much money as possible to bury away somewhere. And yet his children seemed not so hard; rather sentimental and human, reactions, no doubt, from the grinding atmosphere from which they had managed finally to extricate themselves.

But it is of Ida that I wish to speak. Ida, whom I first saw when my previously mentioned relative suggested that I go with him to find out if Hauchawout had any hay to sell. "You'll meet a character well worth the skill of any portrayer of fact," he added. It was Ida who came to the door in answer to a loud "Hallo!" however, and I saw a woman prematurely old or overworked, drab and yet robust, a huge creature with small and rather nervous eyes, red, sunburned face and hands, a small nose, and faded red hair done into a careless knot at the back of her head. At the request of my "in–law" to know where her father was, she pointed to the barn. "He just went out to feed the pigs," she added. We swung through a narrow gate and followed a well fenced road to the barn, where, just outside a great pen containing perhaps thirty pigs, stood Hauchawout, a pail in each hand, his brown overalls stuck in his boots, gazing reflectively at his grunting property.

"Nice pigs, eh, Mr. Hauchawout?" commented my relative.

"Yes," he answered, with a marked accent, at the same time turning a quizzical and none too kindly eye upon us. "It's about time they go now. What they eat from now on makes me no money."

I glanced amusedly at my relative, but he was gazing politely at his host.

"Any hay for sale, Mr. Hauchawout?"

"How much you t'ink you pay?" he asked cannily.

"Oh, whatever the market price is. Seventeen dollars, I hear."

"Not py me. What I got I keep at dat price. Hay vill pe vorth yussed five tollars more if dis vedder keeps up." He surveyed the dry green–blue landscape, untouched by rain for these several weeks past.

My relative smiled.

"Very well. You're quite right, if you think it's going to stay dry. You wouldn't take eighteen a ton, I suppose?"

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"No; nor twenty. I t'ink hay goes to twenty-two pefore July. Anyhow, vot I got I can use next vinter if I can't sell him."

I stared at this crude, vigorous, self-protective soul. His house and barn seemed to confirm all I had heard. The house was small, yellow, porchless, inhospitable, the walks at the front and side worn and flowerless, the grass, such as it was, nearly treeless. A thin dog and some chickens were in the shade of one fair-sized tree that graced a corner. Several horses were browsing in the barn lot, for it was Sunday, and the sectarian atmosphere of this region rather enforced a strict observance of the day. They were as thin as even moderate health would permit. But Hauchawout, standing vigorous and ruddy before his large newly painted barn, showed where his heart was. There was no flaw in that structure. It was a fine big barn and held all the other things he so much treasured.

But it was about his daughter that my relative chose to speak as we drove away.

"There's a woman whose life has been ruined by that old razorback," he reflected after volunteering various other details. "She's no beauty, and her chances were never very good, but he would never let any one come near her, and now it's too late, I suppose. I often wonder why she hasn't run away, like her sister, also how she passes her time there with him. Just working all the time, I suppose. I doubt if he ever buys a newspaper. There was a story going the rounds here a few years ago about her and a farm-hand who worked for Hauchawout. Hauchawout caught him tapping at her shutter at two in the morning and beat him up with a hoe-handle. Whether there was anything between them or not no one knows. Anyway, she's been here ever since, and I doubt if anybody ever courts her now."

II

I neither saw nor heard of this family for a period of five years, during which time I worked in other places. Then one summer-time, returning for a vacation, I learned that "the old man" had died, and the property had been divided by law, no will having been left. The lorn Ida, after a service of thirty-two or-three years in her father's behalf, cooking, sweeping, washing, ironing, feeding the chickens and pigs, and helping her father to reap and pitch hay, had secured an equal fifth with the others, no more, a total of fifteen acres of land and two thousand dollars in cash. The land had already been leased on shares to her prosperous brother, the one with the automobile, and the cash placed out at interest. To eke out an existence, which was still apparently not much improved, Ida had gone to work, first as a laundress in a South Bixley (the county seat) laundry, at a later date as a canner of tomatoes in the summer canning season, and then as housekeeper in a well-to-do canner's family. She was reported by my host's wife as still husbandless, even loverless, though there was a rumor to the effect that now that she had property and money in the bank, she was being "set up to" by Arlo Wilkens, a garrulous ne'er-do-well barber of Shrivertown, a drunken, roystering, but now rather exploded and passé, person of fifty; and one Henry Widdle, another ne'er-do-well of a somewhat more savory character, since he was one who was credited with having neither the strength nor courage to be drunken or roystering. He was the son of a local farmer who himself owned no land and worked that of others. With no education of any description, this son had wandered off some years before, trying here and there to sell trees for a nursery and failing utterly, as he himself told me; and then going to work in a furniture factory in Chicago, which was too hard for him; and later wandering as far West as Colorado, where necessity compelled him to become a railroad hand for a time. ("I served my time on the Denver Rio Grande," he used to say.) But finding this too hard also, he had quit, and returned to the comparative ease of his former life here, which had no doubt brightened by contrast. Once here again, he found life none too easy, but at the time I knew him he was making a living by driving for a local contractor, that being "the easiest thing he could find," as a son of the relative aforementioned most uncharitably remarked.

While working in this region again for a summer under some trees that crowned a hill and close by a highroad which crossed one slope of it, I was often made aware of this swain by the squeak of the wheels of his wagon as

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he hauled his loads of stone or sand or lumber in one direction or another. And later I came to know him, he being well known, as are most country people the one to the other in a region such as this, to the two sons of my host. Occasionally, as they worked in a field of potatoes alongside the hill on which I worked, I could see them hailing this man as he passed, he for some reason appealing to them as one who offered a source of idle amusement or entertainment. Several times I ambled over and joined them, the possibility of country-side news enticing me. He proved an aimless, unpivoted, and chartless soul, drifting nowhere in particular and with no least conception of either the order or the thoroughgoing intellectual processes of life, and yet not wholly uninteresting to me. Why? I often wondered. In so far as I could see, he picked only vaguely at or fumbled unintelligently with such phases and aspects of life as he encountered. He spoke persistently and yet indefinitely of the things he had seen in his travels, the mountains of the West, the plains of Texas, where he had tried to sell trees, the worth of this region in which he lived, and yet he could only report fragmentarily of all he had seen. The mountains of Colorado were "purty high," the scenery "purty fine in some places." In Texas it had been hot and dry, "not so many trees in most places; but I couldn't sell any." The people he had met everywhere were little more than moving objects or figures in a dream. His mind seemed to blur almost everything he saw. If he registered any definite vital impression of any kind, in the past or the present, I could not come to know. And yet he was a suitor, as he once admitted to us via our jesting, for the hand of the much-buffed Ida; and, as I learned later in the same year, he did finally succeed in marrying her, thus worsting the aged and no doubt much more skillful Wilkens.

And still later in the same year, since I had manifested an interest in him and Ida, it was reported to me that they were building a small house or shack on her acres, and with her money, and would be in it before spring. They were working together, so the letter ran, with the carpenters, he hauling lumber and sand and brick and she working with hammer and nails. Still later I learned that they were comfortably housed, had a cow, some pigs and chickens, a horse and various implements, all furnished by her capital, and that they were both working in the fields.

The thing that interested me was the fact that at last, after so many years, having secured a man, even of so shambling a character, the fair Ida was prone to make a god of him.

"Gee!" one of the sons commented to me upon my return the following summer, "Widdle has a cinch now. He don't need to do any more hard work. She gets up in the morning and feeds the chickens and pigs and milks the cow and gets his breakfast while he lies in bed. He works in the field plowing sometimes, but she plows, too."

"Yes, and I've seen her pitch hay into the barn from the wagon, just as she did for her father," added the second youth.

"Ah, but the difference! the difference!" mine host, the father, was at pains to point out rather jocosely. "Then it was against her will and without the enabling power of love, while now "

"Love's not gonna make hay any lighter," sagely observed one of the boys.

"What treachery to romance!" I chided.

"No, nor make plowin' any easier, nuther. Aw! haw!" This from a farm-hand, a fixture about the place. "An' I've seen her doin' that, too."

I did my best to stand up for romance, come what might.

Be that as it may, Widdle was about these days in a cheerful and even facetious frame of mind. When I knew him as a teamster he had seemed to wear a heavy and sad look, as though the mystery of life, or perhaps better the struggle for existence, pressed on him as much as it does on any of us. But now that his fortune had improved, he was a trifle more spruce, not so much in clothes, which were the usual farmer wear, but in manner. On certain

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days, especially in the afternoon, when his home chores were not too onerous or his wife was taking care of them for him, he came visiting my woodland table on its hill. A great and beautiful panorama spread before us. He inquired one day, rather nibblish in manner, as to the matter and manner of writing. Could a man make a living at that now, say? Did you have to write much or little in order to get along? Did I write for these here now magazines?

Rather ruefully I admitted that when I could I did. The way of ye humble scribe, I tried to make plain, was at times thorny. Still, I had no great reason to complain.

We then drifted to the business of farming, and here, I confess, I felt myself to be on much firmer ground. How was he getting along? Had he made much out of his first season's crop? How was his second progressing? Did he find fifteen acres difficult to manage? Was his wife well?

To the last question he replied that she was, doing very well indeed, but as for the second from the last:

"Not so very. Course, now," he went on musingly, "we ain't got the best implements yet, an' my wife's health ain't as good this summer as 'twas last; but we're gettin' along all right. I got mebbe as much as a hundred barrels o' potatas comin' along, an' mebbe three hundred bushels o' corn. Fer myself, I'm more interested in this here chicken business, if I could once git it a-goin' right. Course we ain't got all the up-to-date things we need, but I'm calc'latin' that next year, if everything goes right, I'll add a new pen an' a coupla runways to the coop I got up there, an' try my hand at more chickens."

Never his wife's, I noticed, when it came to this end of the farming institution. And as an aside I could not help thinking of those breakfasts in bed and of his wife pitching hay and plowing, as well as milking the cow and feeding the chickens while he slept.

The lorn Ida and her great love! And then one day, expressing curiosity as to this menage, I was taken there to visit. The place looked comfortable enough a small, unpainted, two-room affair, with a lean-to at the back for a kitchen, a porch added only the preceding spring, so that milord might have a view of the thymy valley below, with its green fields and distant hills, while he smoked and meditated. It was very clean, as I noticed even from a distance, the doorway and the paths and all. And all about it, at points equidistant from the kitchen, were built a barn, a corn-crib, a smokehouse and a chicken-coop, to say nothing of a new well-top, all unpainted as yet, but all framed by the delicious green of the lawn. And Widdle, once he came forward, commented rather shyly on his treasures, walking about with me the while and pointing them out.

"What with all the other things I gotta do, I ain't got round to paintin' yet; but I low as how this comin' fall or spring mebbe I'll be able to do sumpin' on it, if my wife's health keeps up. These chickens are a sight o' bother at times, an' we're takin' on another cow next week, an' some pigs."

I thought of those glum days when he was still hauling sand and stone in his squeaky wagon.

And then came Ida, big, bony, silent, diffident, red-tanned by sun and weather, to whom this narrow fifteen-acre world was no doubt a paradise. Love had at last come to her. It being a Sunday afternoon, the only appropriate time to make a call in the farming world, when presumably the chores of the week were out of the way, still she was astir among her pots and pans, though she came forward and made us welcome in her shy way. Wouldn't we sit down? Wouldn't we have a glass of milk? The worthy Widdle, resuming his seat on the porch, went on smoking and dreaming and surveying his possessions. If ever a man looked at ease, he did, and his wife seemed to take great satisfaction in his comfort. She smiled as we talked to him or answered in monosyllables when we addressed her, having been so long repressed by her father, as I assumed, that she could not talk.

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But my relative had called my attention to one thing which I was to note, and that was that despite the fact she was within three months of an accouchement, we would find her working as usual, which was true. She was obviously as near her day as that, and yet during our visit she went to look after the pigs and chickens, the while milord smoked on and talked. His one theme was his farm, his proposed addition to his chicken-coop, a proposed enlargement of his pig-pen, the fact that his farm would be better if he could afford to take over the five acres to the east, and so on. Several times he referred to his tour of the West and the fact that he had "served his time" on the Denver Rio Grande.

After that I could not help thinking of him from time to time, for he illustrated to me again so clearly the casual and accidental character of so many things in nature, the fact that fortune, strength, ease, beauty, fame, any power of the mind or body, come in the main to the individual as gifts and are so often not even added to or developed by any effort of his. Here was this vague, casual weakling drawn back to this region by a kind of sixth sense which regulated his well-being, and after he had failed in all other things, only to find this repressed and yet now free victim, his wife, seeking, by the aid of her small means, some satisfaction in the world of love through him. But did he really care for her? I sometimes asked myself. Could he? Had he the capacity, the power of appreciation and understanding which any worth-while love requires? I wondered.

III

The events of the following September seemed to answer the question in a rather definite way, and yet I am not so sure that they did, either. Life is so casual; love, or the matter of affinity, such an indefinite thing with so many! I was sleeping in a large room which faced the front of the house—a room which commanded the slope of a hill and a distant and splendid valley beyond. Outside was a number of evergreens and horse-chestnuts that rustled and whispered in the slightest breeze. At two or three of the clock of one of those fine moonlit nights I heard a knocking below and a voice calling:

"Oh, Mis' K— ! Oh, Mis' K— !"

Fearing that my hostess might not hear, I went to one of the open windows; but as I did so, the door below opened, and I heard her voice and then Widdle's, though I could not make him out in the pale light. He seemed, for once, somewhat concerned, and asked if she would not come over and see his wife.

"She's been taken powerful' bad all of a sudden, Mis' K— , I heard him say. "She ain't been feelin' well for the last few days; been complainin', sorta, an' she's very bad now, an' I don't know what to do. It'd be a big favor if you'd come. Mis' Agrew 'phoned fer a doctor fer me, but she don't seem to be able to get none yet."

So the time had come! I wondered how the spinsterish Ida would make out. She was rather old now for motherhood, and so large and ungainly. How would she fare? How serve a nursing child? Not many minutes after I heard Mrs. K— , accompanied by one of her sons, leaving in the machine, the humanitarian and social aspects of the situation seeming to arouse in her the greatest solicitude. Then I heard nothing more until the following noon, when she returned. By that time Mrs. Widdle was very ill indeed. She had worked in the fields up to three days before, and on the day before her illness had attempted to do a week's washing. No help of any kind had been called in, no doctor consulted. Widdle had gone on dreaming as usual, possibly doing his share of the work, but no more, and no doubt accepting cheerfully the sacrifices and the ministrations of his wife until this latest hour.

It was evident to all that the conditions underlying possible motherhood for Mrs. Widdle were most unsatisfactory. During all the nine months of gestation she had given herself no least attention. A doctor called in at this late hour by my relative wagged his head most dolefully. Perhaps she would come through all right, but there was undue pressure on the kidneys. He suggested a nurse, but this Mrs. Widdle, ill as she was, would not

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hear of. The end came swiftly on the following night, and with great agony. She was in nowise fitted to endure the strain, and an attempt to remove the child, accompanied by uric poisoning, did for her completely. Ether was given, and she remained unconscious until she died.

IV

I saw her once afterward, and only once, when I joined the family in "viewing the body." Widdle was in no great standing with either his relatives or his neighbors, being of that poor, drifting, dreaming caliber which offers no least foundation on which a friendship or even a community of interests may be reared. He was usually silent or slow of speech, with just a few ideas relative to his present state upon which to meditate or discuss. Consequently, few neighbors and no relatives, barring her two brothers, were interested to call, and the latter in only the most perfunctory way. Such as did come or had offered assistance had arranged that the parlor, a most sacred place, should be devoted to the last ceremonies and the reception of visitors; and here the body, in a coffin the like of which for color and decoration I had never seen before, lay in state. It was of lavender plush, lined with pink silk, and to be carried by handles of gilt. And this parlor was no doubt a realm of beauty as these two had seen it, and hence arrested my attention. It was furnished with a center-table, now pushed to one side, some stiff and homely chairs with red plush seats, and a parlor wood-stove decorated with nickel and with red isinglass windows in front. On the walls, which were papered a bright pink, were two yarn mottos handsomely framed in walnut, a picture of Widdle and his wife boxed in walnut and glass and surrounded by a wax wreath, and, for sharp contrast, a brightly colored calendar exhibited a blonde movie queen rampant. Gracing the centertable was a Bible, and a yellow plush album in which was not a single picture, for I looked. It must have been the yellow plush that had fascinated them, that ancient and honorable symbol of luxury.

But the coffin! I have no desire to intrude levity in connection with death, and, anyhow, it is said to presage misfortune. Also, I recognize too well the formless and untutored impulse toward beauty which struggles all too feebly in the most of us, animals and men. Out of such have risen Karnak and the Acropolis and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." But at that time, and for all I know the custom may endure to this hour, there were being introduced, to the poorest sections of the big cities at least, and from this experience I judged to the backwoods also, a type of coffin calculated to engage the attention of any lover of color, astonishing confections in yellow, blue, green, silver, and lavender plush, usually lined with contrasting shades of silk and equipped with handles of equally arresting hues—silver, gilt, black, or gray. Trust the profiteer Barnums of the undertaking world to prepare something that would interest the afflicted simple in their hour of bereavement. Beauty, as each interprets it for himself, must certainly be the anodyne that resolves all our pains. At any rate, this coffin was of lavender and lined with pink silk and ornamented with bright gilt handles; and considering the general solidity and angularity of the frame it held, it could not but seem incongruous. Astonishing, in fact, yet obviously selected for its beauty and as a special comfort to the bereaved living, the Honorable Henry Widdle. Indeed, unless I am greatly mistaken, Widdle was for the first time in his life indulging a long repressed impulse toward luxury, which in its turn was disguising itself to him as deep grief.

But the figure in the coffin, embedded in such voluptuous materiality at so late a date, she who had followed the plow and pitched hay, struck me as remarkable. Her hair was thick and coarse, but smoothly plaited and laid—red hair. The large, bony head, with the wide mouth and small nose, looked tired indeed. But one strong arm held snugly the minute infant that had never known life pressed close to her breast and big yearning face.

I turned away, arrested and humiliated by the terrifying cosmic urge that had brought all this about. That face showed lines which stilled all humor. Sleep! I thought, sleep! It is best.

But the little house she had left, that little shell in which she had thought to intrench herself against misery and loneliness. Not a corner or a window or a shelf or a pan but had been scrubbed and shined and dusted repeatedly. The kitchen revealed a collection of utensils almost irritatingly clean; the dining-living-room the same. And

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outside were all the things as she had left them, all in clean and orderly array. And on the front porch, viewing the scenery and greeting the few straggling visitors, was Widdle himself. For the occasion he had donned his best clothes, and looked for all the world as though he were holding a reception or conducting a function of some kind, the importance of which had been solemnly impressed upon his mind.

What interested me most, after seeing this other, was his attitude, the way in which he now faced death and this material as well as spiritual loss, his attitude toward the future, now that this brief solution of most of his material difficulties had been removed. Any one who postulates the mechanical or chemical origin of life, and behaviorism as the path of its development, would have been interested in this case. As I viewed Widdle then, he was but a weak reflection of all the customs or emotional or mental mechanics of his day and realm. It was customary on such occasions to wear black, and he wore black, as much as he could find. He had heard or seen that funerals were occasions of state, so this coffin, with none of the other evidences of grandeur, was introduced into this meager home. He had noted that people grieved, so he drew a long face and wore as sad a mien as he could muster.

But when I asked about his future, after due comments on the pathos of his great loss, he showed a strong, if repressed, interest in the fact that all this which had been his wife's was now his, assuming that no undue wind arose to disturb him. For some reason, due to no conscious effort on my part, he assumed that I was friendly to him and wished him well, and in consequence, not five minutes after I had come out of the house, he wished to know if I had seen the barn. I replied that I had not and expressed interest, and he took me to see it, solemnly and slowly, cortège style. Once there, his spirit seemed to unlimber, and he talked of the future that was now his. The one horse he had there was good enough, but now that he was alone and might need to hire occasional help, he was thinking of buying another. His wife had helped him a good bit, and he wasn't sure whether he could get along now without a man. Next came the pigs, which we examined with care. His wife had thought that four were enough for this fall, but next year, if his crops turned out right, he might try six or eight. There was money in the dairy business, too, if only a man had three or four cows; but there was a lot of trouble connected with feeding, milking, calving, and the like, and he wasn't sure that he understood this as well as his wife had. Did I know anything about the law governing a wife's property or her husband's just claim to it?

"You know," he said, leaning against one of the posts of the pig-pen, "my wife's relations ain't any too friendly to me, fer some reason. I never could make it out, an' I was thinkin' mebbe they'd feel they have a claim on this, though when we bought, she wouldn't have it any other way but joint. 'Squire,' she says to Squire Driggs over to Shrivertown, when she was havin' the property transferred to the two of us when we got married, 'I want this property fixed so that in case anything happens to either of us the other one gets it, money an' all.' That's what she said, an' that's what both of us signed over there to Shrivertown. I got the papers in the house here now. That's clear enough, ain't it? I'd like to bring the papers up to you some time an' let you look at 'em. There ain't no way they could interfere with that, is there, do you think?"

I thought not, and said so. It seemed to ease him some. Then he led me to the chicken-coop and the milk-house. We stood at a fence and looked over that five-acre field adjoining which some day he hoped to own. After a few more comments as to the merits of the departed, I left, and saw him but once after, some two weeks later, when, the funeral being over and the first fresh misery of his grief having passed, he came up to my table on the hilltop one sunny afternoon to spend a social moment or two, as I thought, but really to discuss the latter phases of his position as master and widower.

V

The afternoon was so fine! A sea of crystal light bathed the hills and valleys, and where I worked, the ground was mottled with light sifting through the leaves. Birds sang, and two woodchucks, bitten by curiosity, reconnoitered my realm. Then the brush crackled, and forward came Widdle out of nowhere and sidling slightly as he came.

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"Nice view you have up here."

"Yes, I enjoy it very much. Have that stump over there. How've you been?"

"Oh, pretty fair, thank you. I was thinkin' you might like to look over them papers I spoke about. I have 'em here now." And he fished in his coat-pocket.

I turned over the one paper he extracted, which was a memorandum to the effect that Ida Widdle, née Hauchawout, sole owner of such-and-such property, desired and hereby agreed that in the event of her death and the absence of any children, her husband, Henry Widdle, was to succeed her as sole owner and administrator. And this was witnessed by Notary Driggs of Shrivertown.

"There's no question in my mind as to the validity of that," I solemnly assured him. "It seems to me that a lawyer could make it very difficult for any one to disturb you in your place. Still, I'm not a lawyer. Why not see one? Or ask Justice Driggs?"

"Well," he said, turning his head slowly and as slowly taking the paper, "I don't like to go to any lawyer unless I have to. I'm afraid of 'em. They could make a lot o' trouble for an inexperienced feller like me. I don't calc'late to do nothin' unless I have to, but I thought you might know."

I stopped my work and meditated on his fate and how well chance had dealt with him in one way and another. After a time, during which it seemed to me that he might be thinking of the misused Ida, he searched in his pockets and finally extracted another paper, which I thought might be another agreement of some kind. He held this in his hands for a minute or more, then unfolding the paper very carefully he said:

"You bein' a writer, I thought I'd bring up a little thing I've fixed up here about my wife an' ask you what you thought of it. It's some poetry I've been thinkin' I'd put in 'The Banner' over here to Bixley."

I could scarcely suppress my astonishment, let alone my curiosity, as to the nature of this composition which was to be published, at his request presumably, by "The Banner."

"How do you mean, publish?" I inquired respectfully, and holding out my hand. "Suppose you let me see it."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather read it to you. It's in my writin' an' kind o' mixed up, but I can read it to you."

"By all means. But tell me something about it first. You say it's a poem about your wife. Did you compose it yourself?"

"Yes, sir. Only yesterday an' last night. Well, mebbe three days, countin' the time I been thinkin' on it."

"And it's going to be published in 'The Banner'? Do you submit it, or just how is that?"

"Oh, they always print death-rhymes," he went on in his slow explanatory way. "They charge ten cents a line. Everybody does it when anybody they're fond of dies husband or wife, or like o' that."

"Oh, I see," I hazarded, a great light dawning. "It's a custom, and you feel in a way that you ought to do it."

"Yes, sir, that's it. If it don't cost too much, I thought I'd just put this in."

I prepared to give the matter attentive ear.

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"Read it," I said, and he smoothed out the paper, the slanting afternoon light falling over him and it, and began:

"Dearest wife who now are dead,
I miss you as in the days before we were wed.
Gone is your kind touch, your loving care.
I look around, but can't find you anywhere.
The kind deeds that you scattered far and wide
Tell me that you are no longer by my side.
I look around now and seek you in vain;
My tears they fall like rain.
The house is silent without your dear tread,
Everywhere that you were you are now missed instead.
I am lonely now but our Father above
Now has you in His care and love.
If gone from me, you are happy there at rest,
And death that tortures me for you is best.
Dear husband, weep not for your departed wife,
For from heaven, looking down, I see you as in life.
I see your woe and grief and misery,
And would be there with you if I could in glee,
So kind you were, dear husband, and so good.
The Father of All above knows what you've withstood;
He knows how hard you've tried, what efforts you have made,
To help and serve in love. Don't be afraid.
Face the world with courage, husband dear,
And never have any fear.
For if in life you may now be misunderstood,
Our Father who is in heaven knows that you were kind and good.
Your efforts were very many, your rewards were few.
The world should know how kind you were and true.
The tongues of men may slander, husband dear,
But do not let that trouble your ear.
I, your wife in heaven, know how we
While we were together on earth did love and agree,
And in heaven too, when it pleases God to call us,
We will love and be happy together as we did on earth always.'"

He paused and looked up, and I confess that by now my mouth had unconsciously opened a little. The simplicity! The naïf unconsciousness of possible ridicule, of anachronism, of false interpretation on the part of those who could not know! Could a mind be so obtuse to even the most elementary phases of fact as to believe that this was not ridiculous? I stared while he gazed, waiting for some favorable comment.

"Tell me," I managed to say at last, "did you write all that yourself?"

"Well, you know the papers publish them death-rhymes right along, every week. I see 'em in 'The Banner,' an' I just took some of the lines from them, but most of 'em are mine."

"You have quite a few lines there," I volunteered, trying to evade the necessity for comment. "At ten cents a line you are going to have a big bill to pay."

"That's so," he agreed, scratching his head rather ruefully. "I hadn't thought o' that. Let's see," and he began to count them.

Looking at him as he counted up the cost of his poetic flight, which totaled three dollars and forty cents, as he finally announced, and thinking of his wife, the dreary round of her days, the heavy labor up to the very hour of her death, the carefully exacted agreement as to the ultimate disposition of her property in case of her death, I

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could not help thinking of the pathos and the futility of so much that we call life and effort, the absolute nonsense that living becomes in so many instances. Above me as I speculated was that great blazing ball we call the "sun" spinning about in space and with its attendant planets. And upon the surface of this thing, "the earth," we, with our millions of little things we call "homes" and "possessions." And about and above and beneath us, mysteries, mysteries, mysteries. Not even within miles of a guess as to what we are or what the sun is or the "reason" for our being here for anything. And yet passion and lust and beauty and greed and yearning, this endless pother and bitterness and delight in order to retain this elusive and inexplicable something, "life," "us," "ours," in space. Birds cawing, trees blowing and whispering, fields teeming with mysterious and yet needed things, and then, on every hand, this wealth of tragedy. Life living on life, men and animals plotting and scheming as though there were only so much to be had and all of that in the possession of others.

And yet, despite the mystery and the suffering and the bitterness, here was this golden day, an enormous treasure in itself, and these lovely trees, those mountains blue, this wondrous, soothing panorama. Beauty, beauty, beauty, appealing and consoling to the heart life's anodyne. And here, in the very heart of it, Ida Hauchawout, and her father, with his "no enimel gets fet py me," and his son who threw a pitchfork at him, and this poor clown before me with his death-rhymes and his fear of losing the little that had been left to him. His love. His loss. His gain. His desire to place himself right before the "world." This was what he was rhyming about. This was what he was worrying about.

Was he guilty of any wrong before the world? Not a bit that I could see. Was he entitled to what he had come by? As much so as any of us are entitled to anything. But here he was, worrying, worrying, worrying, and trying to decide in the face of his loss or gain whether his verse, this tribute or self-justification, was worth three dollars and forty cents to him as a display in a miserable, meagerly circulated and quickly forgotten country newspaper.

Mesdames and Messieurs, are we all mad? Or am I? Or is life? Is the whole thing, what it appears to be to so many, an aimless, insane, accidental jumble and gibberish? We articulate or put together out of old mysteries new mysteries, machines, methods, theories. But to what end? What about all the Hauchawouts, past, present, and to come, sons, daughters, and relatives, and all the fighting and the cruelty and the parading and the nonsense?

The crude and defeated Ida. And this fumbling, seeking, and rather to be pitied dub with his rhymes. Myself, writing and wondering about it all.

VI

A letter written several years later by my relative's wife adds this for my enlightenment:

"He has taken to religion now and interprets the Bible in his own fumbling way, coming to me occasionally for help. He plows his fields and meditates, expecting God any minute to come in the form of a dragon or giant and finish him and all men. He has figured out that the world will come to an end in this wise: God will appear as a dragon or a gigantic man, and wherever he places his foot, there life will cease to exist. That will be the end of the world. Yet he has no notion that the world is any larger than the United States at most. I said to him once, 'But it would take Him a long time to step over all the world and crush out all life.' 'Yes, that's so,' he replied; 'but I guess His feet are bigger than ours maybe as big as a barn,' those great barns! 'an' mebbe He can walk faster than we can.' He has lost himself completely in the Bible now and reads and meditates all the time, applying everything he reads to his own few acres. He still lives alone and does his own cooking. His chief dish is cornmeal mush, which he boils and pours into saucers or flat plates to the thickness he wants, because he doesn't know how to pour it into a deep dish and slice it."