

**THE SCARECROW; OR, THE
GLASS OF
TRUTH; A TRAGEDY
OF THE LUDICROUS**

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The scarecrow; or, The glass of truth; a tragedy of the ludicrous by Percy MacKaye

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PERCY MACKAYE

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OF THE LUDICROUS**

THE SCARECROW

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OR

THE GLASS OF TRUTH

A Tragedy of the Ludicrous

BY

PERCY MACKAYE

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1911

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To

MY MOTHER

IN MEMORY OF AUSPICIOUS

"COUNTINGS OF THE CROWS"

BY OLD NEW ENGLAND CORN-FIELDS

PREFACE

BUT for a fantasy of Nathaniel Hawthorne, this play, of course, would never have been written. In "Mosses from an Old Manse," the *Moralized Legend* "Feathertop" relates, in some twenty pages of its author's inimitable style, how Mother Rigby, a reputed witch of old New England days, converted a corn-patch scarecrow into the semblance of a fine gentleman of the period; how she despatched this semblance to "play its part in the great world, where not one man in a hundred, she affirmed, was gifted with more real substance than itself"; how there the scarecrow, while paying court to pretty Polly Gookin, the rosy, simpering daughter of Justice Gookin, discovered its own image in a looking-glass, returned to Mother Rigby's cottage, and dissolved into its original elements.

My indebtedness, therefore, to this source, in undertaking the present play, goes without saying. Yet it would not be true, either to Hawthorne's work or my own, to classify "The Scarecrow" as a dramatization of "Feathertop." Were it intended to be such, the many radical departures from the conception and the treatment of Hawthorne which are evident in the present work would have to be regarded as so many unwarrantable liberties taken with its

original material; the function of the play itself would, in such case, become purely formal,—translative of a narrative to its appropriate dramatic form,—and as such, however interesting and commendable an effort, would have lost all *raison d'être* for the writer.

But such, I may say, has not been my intention. My aim has been quite otherwise. Starting with the same basic theme, I have sought to elaborate it, by my own treatment, to a different and more inclusive issue.

Without particularizing here the full substance of Hawthorne's consummate sketch, which is available to every reader, the divergence I refer to may be summed up briefly.

The scarecrow Feathertop of Hawthorne is the imaginative epitome or symbol of human charlatanism, with special emphasis upon the coxcombrity of fashionable society. In his essential superficiality he is characterized as a fop, "strangely self-satisfied," with "nobby little nose thrust into the air." "And many a fine gentleman," says Mother Rigby, "has a pumpkin-head as well as my scarecrow." His hollow semblance is the shallowness of a "well-digested conventionalism, which had incorporated itself thoroughly with his substance and transformed him into a work of art." "But the clothes in this case were to be the making of the man," and so Mother Rigby, after fitting him out in a suit of embroidered finery, endows him as a finishing touch "with a great deal of brass, which she applied to his forehead, thus

making it yellower than before. 'With that brass alone,' quoth she, 'thou canst pay thy way all over the earth.'

Similarly, the other characters are sketched by Hawthorne in accord with this general conception. Pretty Polly Gookin, "tossing her head and managing her fan" before the mirror, views therein "an unsubstantial little maid that reflected every gesture and did all the foolish things that Polly did, but without making her ashamed of them. In short, it was the fault of pretty Polly's ability, rather than her will, if she failed to be as complete an artifice as the illustrious Feathertop himself."

Thus the *Moralized Legend* reveals itself as a satire upon a restricted artificial phase of society. As such, it runs its brief course, with all the poetic charm and fanciful suggestiveness of our great New Englander's prose style, to its appropriate *dénouement*, — the disintegration of its hero.

"'My poor, dear, pretty Feathertop,' quoth Mother Rigby, with a rueful glance at the relics of her ill-fated contrivance, 'there are thousands upon thousands of coxcombs and charlatans in the world made up of just such a jumble of worn-out, forgotten, and good-for-nothing trash as he was, yet they live in fair repute and never see themselves for what they are. And why should my poor puppet be the only one to know himself and perish for it?'"

Coxcomby and charlatanism, then, are the butt of Hawthorne's satire in his *Legend*. The nature of his theme, however, is susceptible of an application

far less restricted, a development far more universal, than such satire. This wider issue once or twice in his sketch he seems to have touched upon, only immediately to ignore again. Thus, in the very last paragraph, Mother Rigby exclaims: "Poor Feather-top! I could easily give him another chance and send him forth again to-morrow. But no! *His feelings are too tender—his sensibilities too deep.*"

In these words, spoken in irony, Hawthorne ends his narrative with an undeveloped aspect of his theme, which constitutes the starting-point of the conception of my play: the aspect, namely, of the *essential tragedy of the ludicrous*; an aspect which, in its development, inevitably predicates for my play a divergent treatment and a different conclusion. The element of human sympathy is here substituted for that of irony, as criterion of the common absurdity of mankind.

The scarecrow Feather-top is ridiculous, as the emblem of a superficial fop; the scarecrow Ravensbane is pitiful, as the emblem of human bathos.

Compared with our own ideas of human perfection, what human rubbish we are! Of what incongruous elements are we constructed by time and inheritance wherewith to realize the reasonableness, the power, the altruism, of our dreams! What absurdity is our highest consummation! Yet the sense of our common deficiency is, after all, our salvation. *There* is one reality which is a basic hope for the realization of those dreams. This sense is human sympathy, which is, it would seem, a more searching critic of