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ESTHER WATERS

AN ENGLISH STORY

BY
GEORGE MOORE

— NEW YORK
— BRENTANO'S

ESTHER WATERS

By the Same Author

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ESTHER WATERS: AN ENGLISH STORY
ESTHER WATERS: A DRAMA IN FIVE
ACTS
THE LAKE
THE MUMMER'S WIFE
CONFESSIONS OF A YOUNG MAN
LEWIS SEYMOUR AND SOME WOMEN
MUSLIN
THE UNTILLED FIELD
MEMOIRS OF MY DEAD LIFE
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GRAPHY IN THREE PARTS: (i.) AVE
(ii.) SALVE, (iii.) VALE
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A STORYTELLER'S HOLIDAY
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HÉLOÏSE AND ABÉLARD
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DAPHNIS AND CHLOE
ULICH AND SORACHA
THE MAKING OF AN IMMORTAL (*Play*)

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EPISTLE DEDICATORY

MY DEAR ROLLESTON,

It is quite in accordance with the humour of the great Aristophanes above us, beneath us, within us, without us, that an Irishman should write a book as characteristically English as "Don Quixote" is Spanish, and when the author of "Esther Waters" dedicates his work to another Irishman, it must be plain to all that he is holding the mirror up to Nature. But there is another reason why I should dedicate this book to you. You are an Irish Protestant like myself, and you could always love Ireland without hating England and —. But I am past my patience trying to find logic in a dedication which is an outburst of friendly feeling for an old friend.

It would be pleasant to look down the last five-and-twenty years, but I will look no further than yester-year, when we were engaged in trying to wheedle the English public into accepting the only solution (yours) of the Irish difficulty—a line of railway linking a western harbour with a northern tunnel joining Ireland to Scotland. We failed, of course, in practical result (the official mind repels reason), but our adventure was not without moral gain, for two Irishmen did set out "to strike a blow for Ireland" without coming to blows. How shall we explain it: that the great Aristophanes above us, beneath us, within us, without us, willed it so? and that his divine humour

*was not content with less than that the letters that you wrote
and that I signed must be better written than those you signed
yourself.*

*"It is a modest creed, and yet
Pleasant if one considers it,"*

*to think that your solicitude for others compelled you to give
your best to your friend.*

Yours always,

GEORGE MOORE.

ESTHER WATERS

I.

SHE stood on the platform watching the receding train. The white steam curled above the few bushes that hid the curve of the line, evaporating in the pale evening. A moment more and the last carriage would pass out of sight, the white gates at the crossing swinging slowly forward to let through the impatient passengers.

An oblong box painted reddish brown and tied with a rough rope lay on the seat beside her. The movement of her back and shoulders showed that the bundle she carried was a heavy one, and the sharp bulging of the grey linen cloth that the weight was dead. She wore a faded yellow dress and a black jacket too warm for the day. A girl of twenty, firmly built with short, strong arms and a plump neck that carried a well-turned head with dignity. Her well-formed nostrils redeemed her somewhat thick, fleshy nose, and it was a pleasure to see her grave, almost sullen, face light up with sunny humour; for when she laughed a line of almond-shaped teeth showed between red lips. She was laughing now, the porter having asked her if she were afraid to leave her bundle with her box. Both, he said, would go up together in the donkey-cart. The donkey-cart came down every evening to fetch parcels.

The man lingered, and she heard from him that all the down lands she could see right up to Beading belonged to the squire.

"Beading?" she said. "I thought the Barfields lived in Shoreham."

"So they do," he answered, "near Shoreham yonder, and he pointed to a belt of trees; they be too fine folk for the town. Shoreham, you see, isn't what it was in days gone by with shipyards about the harbour, and ships from all parts dropping their sails as they come within the breakwaters. Not much doing in the way of building down this way—a three-ton boat or two on the stocks, not much more." He would have stayed longer, for the girl was to his fancy, but the station-master called him away to remove some luggage. "You'll find the gate behind yon trees," he cried, looking back. The girl thanked him and strolled up the platform, gazing across the low-lying fields out of which the downs rose in gradual ascents, uncertain if she should leave her bundle with her box.

At the end of the platform the station-master took her ticket and she passed over the level crossing, trying to gather her wits but unable to do so till she caught sight of some "villas," a row of twenty-four semi-detached houses, iron railings, laurels, and French windows. She had been in service in such houses and knew that a general servant was kept in each. But the life in Woodview was a great dream, and she could not imagine herself accomplishing all that would be required of her. There would be a butler, a footman, and a page; she would not mind the page—but the butler and footman, what would they think? There would be an upper-housemaid and an under-housemaid, and perhaps a lady's-maid, and maybe that these ladies had been abroad with the family, and would talk about France and Germany, about trains,

hotels, and travelling all night. But she would not be able to join in; her silence would give them the tip; they would ask her what situations she had been in, and when they learned the truth she would leave disgraced. But she hadn't sufficient money to pay for a ticket to London. And what excuse could she give to Lady Elwin, who had rescued her from Mrs. Dunbar and got her the place of kitchen-maid at Woodview? No, she couldn't go back. Her father would curse her, and perhaps beat her mother and her too. Ah! he would not dare to strike her again, and the girl's face flushed with shameful remembrance. Her little brothers and sisters would cry if she came back. They had little enough to eat as it was. Of course she mustn't go back. How silly of her to think of such a thing!

All the same she would be glad when the first week was over. If she had only a dress to wear in the afternoons! The old yellow thing on her back would never do. But one of her cotton prints was pretty fresh; she must get a bit of red ribbon—that would make a difference. She had heard that the housemaids in places like Woodview always changed their dresses twice a day, and on Sundays went out in silk mantles and hats in the newest fashion. As for the lady's-maid, she of course had all her mistress's clothes, and walked with the butler. What would such people think of a little girl like her! Her heart sank at the thought, and she sighed, anticipating much bitterness and disappointment. Even when her first quarter's wages came due she would hardly be able to buy herself a dress: they would want the money at home. Her quarter's wages! A month's wages most like, for she'd never be able to keep the place. So all those fields belonged to the squire, and those great woods too. "My word! they must be fine folk, quite as fine as Lady Elwin—finer, for she lived in a house like those near the station."

On both sides of the straight road there were tall hedges and the nurserymaids lay in the shadows on the rich summer grass, their perambulators at a little distance, and with the hum of the town dying out of the ear, the girl continued to imagine the future she was about to enter into. She could see two houses, one in grey stone, the other in red brick with a gable covered with ivy; and between them the spire of a church, and questioning a passer-by she learnt that the first house was the Rectory, and that the second was Woodview Lodge. If that was the lodge, what must the house be?

Two hundred yards further on the road branched, passing on either side of a triangular clump of trees; and the lungs of the jaded town girl drew in a deep breath of health. The little green wood soothed her fears and encouraged her to be brave and interrupt the gatekeeper who was playing a flageolet in a small lodge by a white-painted gate. He told her to keep straight on and to be sure to turn to the left when she got to the top; and having never seen an avenue before, she stopped to admire the rough branches of elms, like rafters above the roadway, and to hear the monotonous dove.

Her doubts returned; she never would be able to keep the place. The avenue bent a little, and she came suddenly upon a young man leaning over the paling, smoking his pipe.

"Please, sir, is this the way to Woodview?"

"Yes, right up through the stables, round to the left." And then, noticing the sturdily-built figure, yet graceful in its sturdiness, and the bright cheeks, he said, "You look pretty well done; that bundle is a heavy one, let me hold it for you."

"I am a bit tired," she said, leaning the bundle on the paling. "They told me at the station that the donkey-cart would bring up my box later on."

"Ah, then you are the new kitchen-maid? What's your name?"

"Esther Waters."

"My mother's the cook here; you'll have to mind your p's and q's or else you'll be dropped on. The devil of a temper while it lasts, but not a bad sort if you don't put her out."

"Are you in service here?"

"No, but I hope to be afore long. I could have been two years ago, but mother didn't like me to put on livery, and I don't know how I'll face her when I come running down to go out with the carriage."

"Is the place vacant?" Esther asked, raising her eyes timidly, looking at him sideways.

"Yes, Jim Story got the sack about a week ago. When he had taken a drop he'd tell every blessed thing that was done in the stables. They'd get him down to the 'Red Lion' for the purpose; of course the squire couldn't stand that."

"And shall you take the place?"

"Yes. I'm not going to spend my life carrying parcels up and down the King's Road, Brighton, if I can squeeze in here. It isn't so much the berth that I care about, but the advantages, information fresh from the fountain-head. You won't catch me chattering over the bar at the 'Red Lion' and having every blessed word I say wired up to London and printed next morning in all the papers."

Esther wondered what he was talking about, and, looking at him, she saw a low, narrow forehead, a small, round head, a long nose, a pointed chin, and rather hollow, bloodless cheeks. Notwithstanding the shallow chest, he was powerfully built, the long arms could deal a swinging blow. The low forehead and the lustreless eyes told of a slight, unimaginative brain, but regular

features and a look of natural honesty made William Latch a man that ten men and eighteen women out of twenty would like.

"I see you've got books in that bundle," he said at the end of a long silence. "Fond of readin'?"

"They are mother's books," she replied, hastily. "I was afraid to leave them at the station, for it would be easy for anyone to take one out, and I shouldn't miss it until I undid the bundle."

"Sarah Tucker—that's the upper-housemaid—will be after you to lend them to her. She's a wonderful reader. She has read every story that has come out in *Bow Bells* for the last three years, and you can't puzzle her, try as you will. She knows all the names, can tell you which lord it was that saved the girl from the carriage when the 'osses were tearing like mad towards a precipice a 'undred feet deep, and all about the baronet for whose sake the girl went out to drown herself in the moonlight. I 'aven't read the books mesel', but Sarah and me are great pals."

Esther trembled lest he might ask her again if she were fond of reading, for she could not read; and noticing a change in the expression of her face, he thought she was disappointed to hear he liked Sarah and wished he'd kept his mouth shut.

"Good friends, you know—no more. Sarah and me never hit it off; she will worry me with the stories she reads. I don't know what's your taste, but I likes something out of which I can make a bit. The little 'oss in there, 'e's more in my line."

"They told me at the station," she said, "that the donkey-cart would bring up my box."

"The donkey-cart isn't going to the station to-night—you'll want your things, to be sure. I'll see the coachman; perhaps he's going down with the trap.

But, golly! it has gone the half-hour. I shall catch it for keeping you talking, and my mother has been expecting you for the last hour. She hasn't a soul to help her, and six people coming to dinner. You must say the train was late."

"Let us go, then," cried Esther. "Will you show me the way?"

Evergreen oaks looped into an arch over the iron gate which opened into the pleasure-ground and the angles and urns of an Italian house showed between beech-trees to which rooks were returning. A high brick wall separated the pleasure-ground from the stables, and as William and Esther turned to the left and walked up the roadway they passed by many doors, hearing the trampling of horses and the rattling of chains. The roadway opened into a handsome yard overlooked by the house, the back premises of which had been lately rebuilt in red brick. There were gables and ornamental porches, and through the large kitchen windows Esther caught sight of the servants passing to and fro. At the top of this yard a gate led into the park and through it a string of horses was coming. The horses wore grey clothing and hoods, and Esther noticed the black round eyes looking through the eyelet holes, and the small, ugly boys, who swung their legs, and struck the horses with little ash plants when they reached their heads forward chawing at the bits. "Look, see him, the third one; that's he—that's Silver Braid."

An impatient knocking at the kitchen window interrupted his admiration, and William, turning quickly, said: "Mind you say the train was late; don't say I kept you, or you'll get me into a devil of a pickle. This way." The door led into a passage covered with cocoanut matting, and the handsome room she found herself in did not conform to anything that Esther had seen or

heard of kitchens. For the range almost filled one end of the room, and on it a dozen saucepans were simmering; the dresser reached to the ceiling, and was covered with a multitude of plates and dishes, and Esther thought how she must strive to keep it in its present beautiful condition: the elegant white-capped servants passing round the white table made her feel her own insignificance.

"This is the new kitchen-maid, mother."

"Ah, is it indeed?" said Mrs. Latch, looking up from the tray of tartlets which she had taken from the oven and was filling with jam, and Esther noticed Mrs. Latch's likeness to her son—the same long, narrow nose, the same temples.

"I suppose you'll tell me the train was late?"

"Yes, mother, the train was a quarter of an hour late," William chimed in.

"I didn't ask you, you idle, lazy, good-for-nothing vagabond. I suppose it was you who kept the girl all this time. Six people coming to dinner, and I've been the whole day without a kitchen-maid. If Margaret Gale hadn't come down to help me, I don't know where we should be; as it is, the dinner will be late."

The two housemaids, both in print dresses, stood listening, and Esther's face clouded when Mrs. Latch told her to take her things off and set to and prepare the vegetables, so that she might see what she was made of. Esther did not answer at once, but turned away, saying under her breath: "I must change my dress, and my box hasn't come up from the station yet."

"You can tuck your dress up, and Margaret Gale will lend you her apron."

Esther hesitated.

"What you've got on don't look as if it could come to much damage. Come, now, set to."

The housemaids burst into loud laughter, and then a sullen look of dogged obstinacy passed over and settled on Esther's face, even to the point of visibly darkening the white and rose complexion.

II.

ESTHER lay in a low, narrow iron bed, pushed close against the wall in the full glare of the sun, staring half-awake, her eyes open but still dim with dreams. One end of the room that she had awakened in was under the roof; a lean-to; and through a broad, single pane the early sunlight fell across a wall papered with blue and white flowers. On the wall were two pictures—a girl with a basket of flowers, the coloured supplement of an illustrated newspaper, an old and dilapidated last-century print, and there were photographs of the Gale family in Sunday clothes on the chimney-piece and the green vases that Sarah had given Margaret on her birthday.

It was not yet time to get up, and Esther raised her arms as if to cross them behind her head, but a sudden remembrance of yesterday arrested the movement, and a shadow settled on her face. She had refused to prepare the vegetables, and cook had turned her out of the kitchen. She had rushed from the house in the hope that she might succeed in walking back to London; but William had overtaken her in the avenue; he had argued with her, refusing to allow her to pass; she had tried to tear herself from him, and, failing, had burst into tears. He was kind, and, almost against her will, led her back, saying all the while that he'd speak up for her and make it all right with his mother. But Mrs. Latch had closed her kitchen against her, and she had had to go to her room. Even if they paid her fare back to London,

how was she to face her mother? What would father say? He would drive her from the house. But she had done nothing wrong. Why did cook insult her?

Margaret's bed stood in the shadow of the sloping wall; and she lay one arm thrown forward, her short, square face raised to the light, sleeping so heavily that for a moment Esther felt afraid. But her eyes opened, and Margaret stared at her as if out of eternity. Raising her hands to her eyes she said—

“What time is it?”

“It has just gone six.”

“Then there's plenty of time; we needn't be down before seven. You get on with your dressing; there's no use my getting up till you are done—we'd be tumbling over each other. This is no room to put two girls to sleep in—one glass and not much bigger than your hand. You'll have to shove your box under your bed. In my last place I had a beautiful room with a Brussels carpet, and a marble washstand. I wouldn't stay here three days if it weren't——” The girl laughed and turned lazily over.

Esther did not answer.

“Now, isn't it a grubby little room to put two girls to sleep in? What was your last place like?”

Esther answered that she had hardly been in service before, and Margaret was too much engrossed in her own thoughts to notice the curtness of the answer.

“There's only one thing to be said for Woodview, and that is the eating; we have everything we want, and we'd have more than we want if it weren't for the old cook: she must have her little bit out of everything, and she cuts us short in our bacon in the morning. But that reminds me! You've set the cook against you, and will have to bring her over to your side if you want to remain here.”

"Why should I be asked to wash up the moment I came in the house, before even I had time to change my dress?"

"It was hard on you. She always gets as much as she can out of her kitchen-maid. But last night she was pressed, there was company to dinner. I'd have lent you an apron, and the dress you had on wasn't of much account."

"It isn't because a girl is poor——"

"Oh, I didn't mean that; I know well enough what it is to be hard up." Margaret clasped her stays across her plump figure and walking to the glass began to brush her hair from her forehead, remarking to Esther that she would be glad when fringes were out of fashion, "for I should have no face at all if I was to wear one. Well, I never!" she said, turning, for Esther did not answer her. "Well, I never! saying your prayers. Do you think they do any good?"

Esther looked up angrily.

"I don't want to say anything against saying prayers, but I wouldn't before the others if I was you—they'll chaff dreadful, and call you Creeping Jesus."

"Oh, Margaret, I hope they won't do anything so wicked. But I am afraid I shan't be long here, so it doesn't matter what they think of *me*."

On their way downstairs they opened the windows and doors, and Margaret took Esther round, showing her where the things were kept, and telling her for how many she must lay the table. At that moment a number of boys and men came clattering up the passage asking for breakfast. They cried to Esther to hurry up, declaring that they were late. Esther did not know who they were, but she served them as best she might; and they had not been long gone when the squire and his son Arthur appeared in the yard

Mr. Barfield, nicknamed the Gaffer by the stable lads, was in his youth a famous steeplechase rider, but he was now portly and it was difficult to see in him the young man who had ridden the winner at Liverpool, a feat of horsemanship that his son, Mr. Arthur, known in the stables as Ginger on account of his yellow hair, hoped to outdo by riding at least two winners of the steeplechase, an ambition which he might well entertain, for there seemed no danger of his going up in weight (he could ride a little over nine stone); a lanky, narrow-chested, absurd-looking young man, who, however, came into a new individuality the moment he prepared to get into the saddle. He wore long-necked spurs attached to his boots, and Esther admired the beautiful chestnut horse he rode, a little too thin, she thought; the ugly little boys were mounted on horses equally thin; the squire rode a stout grey cob, and turned in his saddle to better see the chestnut, or was it the brown horse that interested him? the one that walked with his head in the air, pulling at the smallest of all the boys, a little freckled, red-headed fellow.

"That's Silver Braid, the brown horse, the one the Demon is riding. Ginger is riding the chestnut Bayleaf: he won the City and Suburban. Oh, we did have a fine time then, for we all had a bit on. The betting was twenty to one, and I won twelve and sixpence. Grover won thirty shillings. They say that John—that's the butler—won a little fortune; but he is so close no one knows what he has on. Cook wouldn't have anything on; she says that betting is the curse of servants—you know what is said, that it was through betting that Mrs. Latch's husband got into trouble. He was steward here, in the late squire's time."

Margaret had heard the story many times, and she reeled off her rigmarole that "old Latch was a confidential servant, whose accounts were not examined properly till Marksman failed to get in first for the Chester Cup.