

# **The Return**

**By**

**Walter de la Mare**

**[Web-Books.Com](http://Web-Books.Com)**

# The Return

CHAPTER ONE .....	3
CHAPTER TWO .....	10
CHAPTER THREE .....	18
CHAPTER FOUR.....	24
CHAPTER FIVE .....	26
CHAPTER SIX.....	37
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	47
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	53
CHAPTER NINE.....	57
CHAPTER TEN.....	62
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	67
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	76
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	84
CHAPTER FOURTEEN .....	89
CHAPTER FIFTEEN .....	99
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	108
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN .....	115
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	123
CHAPTER NINETEEN.....	130
CHAPTER TWENTY .....	137
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE.....	146
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO .....	151
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE .....	164

## CHAPTER ONE

"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.

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 quiet of harvest. The only other living creature there seemed to Lawford to be his own rather fair, not insubstantial, 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 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 a 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 daily life, lay something not yet quite reckoned with. How often as a boy had he been rapped into a galvanic activity out of the 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 slumbers here:  
Pray, then, the Judgement but increase  
His deep, everlasting peace!'

'But then, do you know you lie at peace?' Lawford audibly questioned, gazing at the doggerel. And yet, as his eyes 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 granite 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 Ste. 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 not, 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. 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 stake through you, and buried you at the crossroads.' And again, a feeling of ennui, a faint disgust at his poor little witticism, clouded over his mind. It was a pity thoughts always ran the easiest way, like water in old ditches.

"'Here lie ye bones of one, Nicholas Sabathier,'" he began murmuring again--'merely bones, mind you; brains and heart are quite another story. And it's pretty certain the fellow had some kind of brains. Besides, poor devil! he killed himself. That seems to hint at brains... Oh, for goodness' sake!' he cried out; so loud that the sound of his voice alarmed even a robin that had perched on a twig almost within touch, with glittering eye intent above its dim red breast on this other and even rarer stranger.

'I wonder if it is XXXIX.; it might be LXXIX.' Lawford cast a cautious glance over his round grey shoulder, then laboriously knelt down beside the stone, and peeped into the gaping cranny. There he encountered merely the tiny, pale-green, faintly conspicuous eyes of a large spider, confronting his own. It was for the moment an alarming, and yet a faintly fascinating experience. The little almost colourless fires remained so changeless. But still, even when at last they had actually vanished into the recesses of that quiet habitation, Lawford did not rise from his knees. An utterly unreasonable feeling of dismay, a sudden weakness and weariness had come over him.

'What is the good of it all?' he asked himself inconsequently-- this monotonous, restless, stupid life to which he was soon to be returning, and for good. He began to realize how ludicrous a spectacle he must be, kneeling here amid the weeds and grass beneath the solemn cypresses. 'Well, you can't have everything,' seemed loosely to express his disquiet.

He stared vacantly at the green and fretted gravestone, dimly aware that his heart was beating with an unusual effort. He felt ill and weak. He leant his hand on the stone and

lifted himself on to the low wooden seat nearby. He drew off his glove and thrust his bare hand under his waistcoat, with his mouth a little ajar, and his eyes fixed on the dark square turret, its bell sharply defined against the evening sky.

'Dead!' a bitter inward voice seemed to break into speech; 'Dead!' The viewless air seemed to be flocking with hidden listeners. The very clearness and the crystal silence were their ambush. He alone seemed to be the target of cold and hostile scrutiny. There was not a breath to breathe in this crisp, pale sunshine. It was all too rare, too thin. The shadows lay like wings everlastingly folded. The robin that had been his only living witness lifted its throat, and broke, as if from the uttermost outskirts of reality, into its shrill, passionless song. Lawford moved heavy eyes from one object to another--bird--sun-gilded stone--those two small earth-worn faces--his hands--a stirring in the grass as of some creature labouring to climb up. It was useless to sit here any longer. He must go back now. Fancies were all very well for a change, but must be only occasional guests in a world devoted to reality. He leaned his hand on the dark grey wood, and closed his eyes. The lids presently unsealed a little, momentarily revealing astonished, aggrieved pupils, and softly, slowly they again descended....

The flaming rose that had swiftly surged from the west into the zenith, dyeing all the churchyard grass a wild and vivid green, and the stooping stones above it a pure faint purple, waned softly back like a falling fountain into its basin. In a few minutes, only a faint orange burned in the west, dimly illuminating with its band of light the huddled figure on his low wood seat, his right hand still pressed against a faintly beating heart. Dusk gathered; the first white stars appeared; out of the shadowy fields a nightjar purred. But there was only the silence of the falling dew among the graves. Down here, under the ink-black cypresses, the blades of the grass were stooping with cold drops; and darkness lay like the hem of an enormous cloak, whose jewels above the breast of its wearer might be in the unfathomable clearness the glittering constellations....

In his small cage of darkness Lawford shuddered and raised a furtive head. He stood up and peered eagerly and strangely from side to side. He stayed quite still, listening as raptly as some wandering night-beast to the indiscriminate stir and echoings of the darkness. He cocked his head above his shoulder and listened again, then turned upon the soundless grass towards the hill. He felt not the faintest astonishment or strangeness in his solitude here; only a little chilled, and physically uneasy; and yet in this vast darkness a faint spiritual exaltation seemed to hover.

He hastened up the narrow path, walking with knees a little bent, like an old labourer who has lived a life of stooping, and came out into the dry and dusty lane. One moment his instinct hesitated as to which turn to take--only a moment; he was soon walking swiftly, almost trotting, downhill with this vivid exaltation in the huge dark night in his heart, and Sheila merely a little angry Titianesque cloud on a scarcely perceptible horizon. He had no notion of the time; the golden hands of his watch were indiscernible in the gloom. But presently, as he passed by, he pressed his face close to the cold glass of a little shop-window, and pierced that out by an old Swiss cuckoo-clock. He would if he hurried just be home before dinner.

He broke into a slow, steady trot, gaining speed as he ran on, vaguely elated to find how well his breath was serving him. An odd smile darkened his face at remembrance of the thoughts he had been thinking. There could be little amiss with the heart of a man who could shamle along like this, taking even pleasure, an increasing pleasure in this long, wolf-like stride. He turned round occasionally to look into the face of some fellow-wayfarer whom he had overtaken, for he felt not only this unusual animation, this peculiar zest, but that, like a boy on some secret errand, he had slightly disguised his very presence, was going masked, as it were. Even his clothes seemed to have connived at this queer illusion. No tailor had for these ten years allowed him so much latitude. He cautiously at last opened his garden gate and with soundless agility mounted the six stone steps, his latch-key ready in his gloveless hand, and softly let himself into the house.

Sheila was out, it seemed, for the maid had forgotten to light the lamp. Without pausing to take off his greatcoat, he hung up his hat, ran nimbly upstairs, and knocked with a light knuckle on his bedroom door. It was closed, but no answer came. He opened it, shut it, locked it, and sat down on the bedside for a moment, in the darkness, so that he could scarcely hear any other sound, as he sat erect and still, like some night animal, wary of danger, attentively alert. Then he rose from the bed, threw off his coat, which was clammy with dew, and lit a candle on the dressing-table.

Its narrow flame lengthened, drooped, brightened, gleamed clearly. He glanced around him, unusually contented--at the ruddiness of the low fire, the brass bedstead, the warm red curtains, the soft silveriness here and there. It seemed as if a heavy and dull dream had withdrawn out of his mind. He would go again some day, and sit on the little hard seat beside the crooked tombstone of the friendless old Huguenot. He opened a drawer, took out his razors, and, faintly whistling, returned to the table and lit a second candle. And still with this strange heightened sense of life stirring in his mind, he drew his hand gently over his chin and looked unto the glass.

For an instant he stood head to foot icily still, without the least feeling, or thought, or stir--staring into the looking-glass. Then an inconceivable drumming beat on his ear. A warm surge, like the onset of a wave, broke in him, flooding neck, face, forehead, even his hands with colour. He caught himself up and wheeled deliberately and completely round, his eyes darting to and fro, suddenly to fix themselves in a prolonged stare, while he took a deep breath, caught back his self-possession and paused. Then he turned and once more confronted the changed strange face in the glass.

Without a sound he drew up a chair and sat down, just as he was, frigid and appalled, at the foot of the bed. To sit like this, with a kind of incredibly swift torrent of consciousness, bearing echoes and images like straws and bubbles on its surface, could not be called thinking. Some stealthy hand had thrust open the sluice of memory. And words, voices, faces of mockery streamed through without connection, tendency, or sense. His hands hung between his knees, a deep and settled frown darkened the features stooping out of the direct rays of the light, and his eyes wandered like busy and inquisitive, but stupid, animals over the floor.

If, in that flood of unintelligible thoughts, anything clearly recurred at all, it was the memory of Sheila. He saw her face, lit, transfigured, distorted, stricken, appealing, horrified. His lids narrowed; a vague terror and horror mastered him. He hid his eyes in his hands and cried without sound, without tears, without hope, like a desolate child. He ceased crying; and sat without stirring. And it seemed after an age of vacancy and meaninglessness he heard a door shut downstairs, a distant voice, and then the rustle of some one slowly ascending the stairs. Some one turned the handle; in vain; tapped. 'Is that you, Arthur?'

For an instant Lawford paused, then like a child listening for an echo, answered, 'Yes, Sheila.' And a sigh broke from him; his voice, except for a little huskiness, was singularly unchanged.

'May I come in?' Lawford stood softly up and glanced once more into the glass. His lips set tight, and a slight frown settled between the long, narrow, intensely dark eyes.

'Just one moment, Sheila,' he answered slowly, 'just one moment.'

'How long will you be?'

He stood erect and raised his voice, gazing the while impassively into the glass.

'It's no use,' he began, as if repeating a lesson, 'it's no use your asking me, Sheila. Please give me a moment, a...I am not quite myself, dear,' he added quite gravely.

The faintest hint of vexation was in the answer.

'What is the matter? Can't I help? It's so very absurd--'

'What is absurd?' he asked dully.

'Why, standing like this outside my own bedroom door. Are you ill? I will send for Dr. Simon.'

'Please, Sheila, do nothing of the kind. I am not ill. I merely want a little time to think in.' There was again a brief pause, and then a slight rattling at the handle.

'Arthur, I insist on knowing at once what's wrong; this does not sound a bit like yourself. It is not even quite like your own voice.'

'It is myself,' he replied stubbornly, staring fixedly into the glass. You must give me a few moments, Sheila. Something has happened. My face. Come back in an hour.'

'Don't be absurd; it's simply wicked to talk like that. How do I know what you are doing? As if I can leave you for an hour in uncertainty! Your face! If you don't open at once I shall believe there's something seriously wrong: I shall send Ada for assistance.'



'If you do that, Sheila, it will be disastrous. I cannot answer for the con--. Go quietly downstairs. Say I am unwell; don't wait dinner for me; come back in an hour; oh, half an hour!'

The answer broke out angrily. 'You must be mad, beside yourself, to ask such a thing. I shall wait in the next room until you call.'

'Wait where you please,' Lawford replied, 'but tell them downstairs.'

'Then if I tell them to wait until half-past eight, you will come down? You say you are not ill: the dinner will be ruined. It's absurd.'

Lawford made no answer. He listened a while, then he deliberately sat down once more to try to think. Like a squirrel in a cage his mind seemed to be aimlessly, unceasingly astir. 'What is it really? What is it really?--really?' He sat there and it seemed to him his body was transparent as glass. It seemed he had no body at all--only the memory of an hallucinatory reflection in the glass, and this inward voice crying, arguing, questioning, threatening out of the silence--'What is it really--really-- REALLY?' And at last, cold, wearied out, he rose once more and leaned between the two long candle-flames, and stared on--on--on, into the glass.

He gave that long, dark face that had been foisted on him tricks to do--lift an eyebrow, frown. There was scarcely any perceptible pause between the wish and its performance. He found to his discomfiture that the face answered instantaneously to the slightest emotion, even to his fainter secondary thoughts; as if these unfamiliar features were not entirely within control. He could not, in fact, without the glass before him, tell precisely what that face WAS expressing. He was still, it seemed, keenly sane. That he would discover for certain when Sheila returned. Terror, rage, horror had fallen back. If only he felt ill, or was in pain: he would have rejoiced at it. He was simply caught in some unheard-of snare--caught, how? when? where? by whom?

## CHAPTER TWO

But the coolness and deliberation of his scrutiny, had to a certain extent calmed Lawford's mind and given him confidence. Hitherto he had met the little difficulties of life only to vanquish them with ease and applause. Now he was standing face to face with the unknown. He burst out laughing, into a long, low, helpless laughter. Then he arose and began to walk softly, swiftly, to and fro across the room--from wall to wall seven paces, and at the fourth, that awful, unseen, brightly-lit profile passed as swiftly over the tranquil surface of the looking-glass. The power of concentration was gone again. He simply paced on mechanically, listening to a Babel of questions, a conflicting medley of answers. But above all the confusion and turmoil of his brain, as a boatswain's whistle rises above a storm, so sounded that same infinitesimal voice, incessantly repeating another question now, 'What are you going to do? What are you going to do?'

And in the midst of this confusion, out of the infinite, as it were, came another sharp tap at the door, and all within sank to utter stillness again.

'It's nearly half-past eight, Arthur; I can't wait any longer.'

Lawford cast a last fleeting look into the glass, turned, and confronted the closed door. 'Very well, Sheila, you shall not wait any longer.' He crossed over to the door, and suddenly a swift crafty idea flashed into his mind.

He tapped on the panel. 'Sheila,' he said softly, 'I want you first, before you come in, to get me something out of my old writing-desk in the smoking-room. Here is the key.' He pushed a tiny key--from off the ring he carried--beneath the door. 'In the third little drawer from the top, on the left side, is a letter; please don't say anything now. It is the letter you wrote me, you will remember, after I had asked you to marry me. You scribbled in the corner under your signature the initials "Y.S.O.A."--do you remember? They meant, You Silly Old Arthur!--do you remember? Will you please get that letter at once?'

'Arthur,' answered the voice from without, empty of all expression, 'what does all this mean, this mystery, this hopeless nonsense about a silly letter? What has happened? Is this a miserable form of persecution? Are you mad?--I refuse to get the letter.'

Lawford stooped, black and angular, against the door. 'I am not mad. Oh, I am in the deadliest earnest, Sheila. You must get the letter, if only for your own peace of mind.' He heard his wife hesitate as she turned. He heard a sob. And once more he waited.

'I have brought the letter,' came the low toneless voice again.

'Have you opened it?'

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

