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# The Scarecrow

**by**

## Walter de la Mare

(from his *Collected Stories for Children* [1947])

The house in which old Mr. Bolsover lived was of a faded yellow primrose colour; it was a long house, but of only two storeys. Yet even its lower windows looked out far away over the meadows lying at this moment spread out beneath them, bright green in the morning sunshine. A narrow veranda shaded the windows, its sloping canopy of copper now a pale grey-green; and around its slim wooden pillars clematis and jessamine clambered. At either end of it was a low weather-worn stone pedestal. On these stood two leaden fauns—the one ever soundlessly piping to the other across the wallflowers and the pinks. And it was the pinks that were now in flower, white as snow, and filling the air with their musky fragrance.

A little clock had just chimed ten, and old Mr. Bolsover, in his cool white jacket, was coming out of the french windows of the breakfast-room with his small niece, Letitia. Letitia had a quick nimble way of walking and talking and turning her head that was like a bird's. And old Mr. Bolsover, with his eyes and his nose, was rather like a bird himself, but of the long-legged, tall, solemn kind—the flamingos and the storks. They came to a standstill together looking out over the meadows.

'Oh, Uncle Tim, what a perfectly lovely morning!' said Letitia.

'A *perfectly* lovely morning,' said Uncle Tim. 'Just as if it had been ordered all complete and to match for a certain small friend of mine!'

*Lettie's like a lovely day:  
She comes; and then—she goes away.'*

'Ah, Uncle Tim,' said Letitia, 'that's called *flattery*.'

'Bless me, my dear,' replied her uncle, squinnying at her from under the glasses of his spectacles, 'it doesn't matter a pin what it's called!'

'Ah, I know all about that!' said Letitia. 'And to think it is exactly a whole year since I was here before! Yet you wouldn't believe a single pink was different. Isn't that funny, Uncle Tim? We are. And why, yes,' she went on hastily, twisting her head on her slender neck, 'there's that curious old Guy Fawkes creature over there by the willows. He's not changed a single bit either.'

'So it is, so it is,' said Uncle Tim, peering out over the meadows. 'Though as a matter of fact, my dear, it's not quite true to say he hasn't changed a *bit*. He has changed his hat. Last year it was an old hat, and now it's a very old hat, a shocking hat. No wonder he covers up one eye under its brim. But it doesn't matter how long you stare at him, he'll stare longer.'

Letitia none the less continued to gaze at the scarecrow—and with a peculiar little frown between her eyes. 'You know, he is a little queer, Uncle Tim—if you look at him long enough. And you can easily pretend you are not *quite* looking at him. You don't seem to remember either,' she went on solemnly, 'that the very last morning I was here you promised me faithfully to tell me all about him. But you didn't, because Mother came in just when I was asking you, and you forgot all about it.'

'Why, so I did,' said Mr. Bolsover. 'That's what comes of having a memory like a bag with a hole in it. That's what comes of the piecrust promises are made of—they just melt in your mouth.... Still, that's Old Joe right enough. *So* old, my dear, you could hardly tell us apart!'

'You're please not to say that, Uncle Tim—it isn't true. You are the youngest oldest kindest Uncle Tim that ever was. So there. But what *were* you going to tell me about Old Joe? Where did he come from? What is he for—except the rooks, I mean? Isn't there a tune about Old Joe? Is that him? Tell me *now*?' cried Letitia. 'Let's sit down here comfily on the stones. Feel! they are as warm as toast with the sun! And now go straight on. *Please*.'

Down sat old Mr. Bolsover; down sat Letitia—side by side like Mr. Punch and his dog Toby. And this is the story he told of Old Joe....

'I must begin, Letitia,' he began, 'at the beginning. It is much the best place from which to get to the end. Now when I was about your age—not quite 129 years ago—I used sometimes to go and stay with an old friend of my mother's—your grandmother's, that is—whose name was Sara Lumb. She was a very stout woman, with black sleek hair, round red cheeks, and dimples for knuckles. And she used, I remember, to wear an amethyst-coloured velvet cap, flat over her ears, and a lace thingummy over her shoulders. I can see her now—her wide face all creased up in smiles, and her fat fingers with their emeralds and their amethysts, and even the large emerald brooch she wore at her neck. She wasn't an aunt of mine, she wasn't even so much as my godmother, but she was extremely kind to me. *Almost* as kind as I am to you! She was very fond of eatables and drinkables too and had a cook that could make every sort of cake that is worth talking about—seven sultanas and nine currants to the square inch. Jams, jellies, raspberry fool, fritters, pancakes, tipsy-cake—they were the best I have ever tasted. So were her stuffed eggs and oyster patties at the Christmas parties. My eye!

'Oh, Uncle Tim,' said Letitia, 'you were a greedy thing.'

'And what's worse,' said her uncle, 'I have never grown out of it. You shall see for yourself at lunch. And if I'm not an unprophetic Double-Dutchman I can already smell apple charlotte. But never mind about that. It's no good—until it's ready. But in any case I am sure you will agree, Letitia, that my old friend Mrs. Lumb was just the kind of old friend for a small boy with a large appetite to stay *with*. This of course was always during the holidays; and, in those days, while there was plenty of hard tack at school, "impots", canings, cabbage stalks, cod, suet-duff, castor oil, bread-and-scrape and what not, there was no such horror as a holiday task. Holiday tasks always remind me, my dear, of the young lady who wanted to go out to swim:

*Mother may I go out to swim?  
Yes, my darling daughter.  
Fold your clothes up neat and trim,  
And don't go near the water.'*

'The rhyme *I* know,' said Letitia, 'is "Hang your clothes on a hickory limb".'

'That's all very well,' said her uncle, 'but just you show me one! Let's have it both ways then:

*Mother, may I go out to swim?  
Yes, my darling daughter.  
Fold your clothes up neat and trim,  
(So at least says Uncle Tim),  
Or hang them up on a hickory limb,  
(That's what Letitia said to him),  
And don't go near the water.*

What—before this violent quarrel—I *meant* was, my dear, that in those days *no* good little boy had to stew indoors in his holidays and simply *detest* reading a book which he would have given half his pocket money to read for its own sake *if* he had never been made to. Q.E.D. But that's quite between ourselves. We must never, never criticize our elders. And anyhow, at my old friend's Mrs. Lumb's there was no need to. It was bliss.

'First, hers was a queer old rambling house, much older than this one, and at least three and a half times as big again. Next, there was beautiful country round it too; fields stretching down their sunny slopes, and little woods and copses on the crests and in the folds and valleys; and a stream—with reeds and rushes and all sorts of water birds—that came brawling over the stones at the foot of her long sloping garden. But I hate descriptions, don't you, Letitia? And *there*, an

orchard so full of cherry trees that in springtime it looked as if it were thick with snow. Well, well, if ever I go to heaven, my child, I hope to see that house and garden again.'

'But isn't it still *there*?' said Letitia. 'I mean, you know, where it used to be?'

'Alas, my dear, no,' said old Mr. Bolsover. 'It is gone for ever. There came a cook—*not* Mrs. Lumb's. She was frying dabs—Brighton dabs—for breakfast one morning; the cat squealed and scratched her leg; she upset the pan; there was one huge blaze; she ran screeching into the garden instead of—well, doing what she ought to have done; and the old house was burned down clean to the ground. Clean. Think of that, Letitia. Always keep your eye on cats and fat. But this, I am thankful to say, was after my dear old friend Mrs. Lumb had left the house and had gone out to live with her younger brother in Ceylon, where the bad cook's strong tea had come from.

'Now in those far-away days *birds* were all my fancy. The wonder is I never sprouted feathers. I loved them too much to carry a catapult, but not enough to refrain from setting traps for them, to catch them for pets. Brick traps and sieve traps. But how would you like to be a linnet or a lark or a thrush or a bullfinch caged up in one tiny room with bars for windows just to amuse a wretch of a boy like me when I was nine or ten or eleven or thereabouts?'

'I shouldn't,' said Letitia. 'But I'd *much* much rather be in your cage than in any other horrid little boy's.'

'Thank you, my dear,' said Mr. Bolsover. 'That's a bargain. Still, the wilder the bird the worse the cage. But then as I was a boy, I did as boys do—bless their little hearts! And I used to weep tears like a crocodile when the sparrows or finches I caught moped off and died. After the funeral I'd stick a bit of wood in the ground to mark the grave—and go off to set another trap.

'My traps were everywhere, and sometimes in places where they had no business to be. But first you must understand what I was after, really *after*.' Mr. Bolsover all but whispered it. 'It was *rare* birds—hoopoes, golden orioles, honey buzzards—the lovely and seldom. Deep down in me I pined for a bird unspeakably marvellous in plumage and song; a bird that nobody else had ever even seen; a bird that had flown clean out of the window of some magician's mind. Which means of course that I had become a little cracked on birds. I used even to dream of that bird sometimes—but then it was usually me myself that was in the cage!

'Well, there was one particular covert that I kept in memory to set a trap in for days before I ventured to make the attempt. This was at the edge of a field where a great many birds of all kinds and sizes were accustomed to haunt, though I never found out why. I watched them again and again, hosts of them—their wings shimmering in the light. It seemed it was their happy secret meeting place—and in spite of Old Joe!'

'*That* Old Joe *there*?' cried Letitia, pointing at the mute lank ungainly figure over against the grey-green willows, with its ragged arms, and battered old hat on one side, that stood blankly gazing at them from out of the field beyond the garden. 'Yes,' said her uncle, 'that Old Joe *there*. You see, between you and me, Letitia, and don't let us look his way for a moment in case we should hurt his feelings, that Old Joe there (as perhaps you've guessed) is a scarecrow. He is nothing but a dumb, tumbledown higger-mugger antiquated old hodmadod. He has never really been anything else; though after all the years he and I have been together, and not a single unkind word said on either side, he is now a sort of twin brother. Like Joseph and Benjamin, you know. Why, if we changed places, I don't suppose you would be able to tell us apart.'

'How can you dare to say such things, Uncle Tim?' cried Letitia, pushing her hand in under his elbow. 'You know perfectly well that that's a sort of a kind of flattery—of yourself, you bad thing.'

'All I can say to that, Miss Tomtit,' replied Uncle Tim, 'is, ask Old Joe. Still, we are old friends now, he and I, whereas the first time I saw him he gave me a pretty bad fright. I had come creeping along on the other side of the hedge, keeping a very wary eye open for anybody that might be in the fields—because I was trespassing. When they were not being ploughed or harrowed or rolled or sown or hoed or cropped, there never was anybody; except perhaps on Sunday, when the farmer, Mr. Jones, a large stout man with a red face and a thick stick, came round to have a look at his crops.

'It was a wide, sloping, odd-shaped field of about forty acres running down to a point, rather like the map of England

turned upside down, and with a little wood of larch on one side of it. This particular morning was in April. It was sunny but cold, and the field was bare except for its flints glinting in the sunbeams. It had been sown, but nothing green was showing.

'Well, I was skirting along the hedge, as I say, but on this side of it, carrying the bird snare I had with me under my jacket, and hardly able to breathe for excitement. I knew exactly—as I peered through the hedge, on which the thorn buds were just breaking green as emeralds—which was the place for me. There was a ditch beyond the hedge, and I could see only a narrow strip of the field at the moment, because of the hedge and bushes in between. But it was truly a little paradise of birds, my dear, and particularly when spring was on its way.

'Well, on I went until I came to the corner by the rickety old gate, which was tied up with a piece of chain. Between you and me it was a shameful old gate. But that is not *our* business. And all of a sudden I caught sight of what I supposed was Farmer Jones himself, glaring straight at me across the field, and not thirty yards away. I fairly jumped in my skin at sight of him, turned hot, then cold, and waited, staring back. For that one instant it seemed as if I could see the very colour of his eyeballs moving in his head.

'But all this was only in the flicker of a moment. No Farmer Jones that, and not even one of his men! It was just Old Joe; *our* Old Joe. That Old Joe there! Come alive. And after all, what is life, Letitia?'

'That's perfectly true, Uncle Tim,' Letitia whispered, edging a little closer to him. 'He might be alive at this very instant.'

'And not only that, you must remember,' went on Mr. Bolsover, 'this was in Old Joe's better days. He was young then. He has been peacocked up in many a fine new suit of old clothes since then, and more hats than I could count on twice my fingers. But *then* he was in his hey-day, in the very bloom of his youth, the glass of fashion and the knave of trumps. And now I wouldn't part with him for a bag of golden guineas. No, not for twenty bags. And though I am very fond of guineas, the reason for that is, first, that I love him for his own sweet sake alone, and next, my dear Letitia, because one doesn't very often see—*see*, I mean—real live fairies in this world.'

Letitia burst out laughing. 'Real live fairies, Uncle Tim!' she cried, stooping forward in her amusement and dragging her skirts tight down over her knees. 'Why, you can't mean to say, you poor dear, that Old Joe's a *fairy*?'

'No,' said Mr. Bolsover, 'I didn't mean to say quite that. Then, as now, Old Joe was the scariest of scaring scarecrows I have ever set eyes on. But, like the primrose in the poem, he was nothing more. No, it wasn't Old Joe himself who was the fairy, no more than the house behind us *is* you and me. Old Joe was merely one of this particular fairy's *rendyvouses*, as the old word goes. He was where she *was*.

'That morning, I remember, he was wearing a pair of slack black-and-white check trousers and a greenish black coat, very wide at the shoulders. Apart from the stick for his arm, another had been pushed into one of his coat-sleeves for a cudgel. Another with a lump at the top made his head and on that was a hat, a hard, battered, square black hat—like the hats farmers and churchwardens used to wear in those days. He was stooping forward a little, staring across at me as I crouched by the gate. As I say, I hugged the wire snare under my jacket closer, and stared back.

'Whether it was because of the hot air that was eddying up from the stony soil under the sun, or because of some cheating effect of the light on the chalky field, I can't say, Letitia. But even while I stood watching him, his head seemed to be ever so gently turning on his shoulders as if he were secretly trying to get a better view of me without my noticing it. Yet all the time I fancied this, I knew it wasn't true.

'Still, I was a good deal startled. Quite apart from crows and such riff-raff, he had certainly scared *me*—for in those days young trespassers (not to mention the old double-toothed mantraps, which were a little before my time) might find themselves in for a smart wallop if they were caught. But even when I had recovered my wits I continued to watch him, and at the same time kept glancing from side to side at the birds that were fighting about me, or feeding, or preening and sunning themselves in the dust. And though by this time I knew him for what he was, I wasn't by any means at ease.

'For even if there were no real eyes in his own head, I was perfectly certain that somebody or something was actually looking at me from under that old black hat, or from out of his sleeve—from *somewhere* about him. The birds were

already used to my being there, simply because I remained so still. After perhaps five whole minutes of this, I squatted down at the edge of the field and began to set my trap.

'But the whole time I was stooping over it, and softly hammering the wooden peg in with a large flint, I was thinking of the old scarecrow—though without looking at him—and knew I was being watched. I say without looking at him, but whenever I got a chance I would snatch a little secret glance at him from between my legs or over my shoulder or from under my arm, pretending that I was doing nothing of the kind. And then at last, the trap finished, I sat down on the grass under the hedge and steadily fixed my eyes on him again.

'The sun climbed slowly up the blue sky, his rays twinkling from sharp-cut stone to stone and scrap of glass. The hot air rilled on at his feet. The birds went about their business, and nothing else happened. I watched so hard that my eyes began to water, but whatever was hiding there, if anything *was* hiding there, could be as patient as I was. And at last I turned home again.

'At the far corner of the field under an old thorn tree I stooped down once more as if I were tying up my shoe lace, and had another long look, and then I was perfectly certain I had caught a glimpse of something moving there. It was as if a face had very stealthily peered out of the shadow of the old scarecrow, and, on sighting me under the thorn tree, had as swiftly withdrawn into hiding again.

'All the rest of that day I could think of nothing else but Old Joe, assuring myself that my eyes had deceived me, or that a bird perched on his shoulder had fluttered down, or that a very faint breeze from over the open upland had moved in his sleeve. Or that I had made it all up. Yet I knew deep down inside me that this wasn't true. It was easy to invent explanations, but none of them fitted.'

'It might, of course, Uncle Tim, you know,' said Letitia, 'it might have been not a bird but some little animal, mightn't it? I once saw a hare skipping about in the middle of a field, and then suddenly, though there wasn't even the tip of his ear showing before, there was another hare. And then another: would you believe it? And they went racing over the field one after the other until they went right out of sight. Or might it have been a bird, do you think, which was building its nest in Old Joe? Robins, you know, build their nests anywhere, even in an old boot. And I have seen a tit's nest with I don't know how many eggs in it in an old pump. And look, Uncle Tim, there is a bird actually perched on Old Joe's shoulder now! That's what it might have been, I think—some little animal, or bird nesting.'

'Well, you shall hear,' said Uncle Tim. 'But I am quite certain that if you had been with me that morning, hundreds of years ago, you would have agreed that there was something different about Old Joe; different, I mean, from what he looks like now. He looked *queer*. I can't quite explain; but it was the difference between an empty furnished house and the same house with its family in it. It was the difference between fishing in a millpond which has fish in it and in one which has none. It was the difference between you yourself when you are really asleep and when you are only foxing and pretending to be. And what's more, sure enough, I was right.

'Now I had my proper bedtime at Mrs. Lumb's; and before it, always, an apple and a glass of milk. My old friend was not only a great believer in apples, but she had seven beautiful Jersey cows, which are a great help, my dear, not only at bedtime, but with gooseberry tart or apple pie. But she wasn't one of those Uncle Tims who want everything done exactly at the right moment. She didn't wait till the clock struck eight (which just shows how easy it is to rhyme if you don't try to) and then come peeping in to see if I was safe in bed.'

'Why, you know very well', said Letitia, 'you don't do that yourself.'

'Aha!' said Mr. Bolsover, 'I wonder. People who sleep with one eye open grow as wise as old King Solomon. I creep and I creep and I creep, and every door has a keyhole. But never mind that. That very evening after my first sight of Old Joe, and when if I had been a nice honest boy I should have been in bed, I made my way down to his field again—slipping on from bush to bush, tree to tree, as cautiously as I could, so cautiously that I trod on the scut of a bunny, Esmeralda by name, that happened to be enjoying a dandelion for her supper on the other side of a bramble bush.

'When I reached my hawthorn tree—and hundreds of years old *that* looked—I stooped down beside its roots very low to the the ground, having made up my mind to watch until the evening grew too dark to see across the field. It was getting

into May, and the air was so sweet and still and fresh that your eyes almost shut with bliss of themselves every time you breathed. And in those days, Letitia, we kept clocks by the sun. We didn't cheat him in the morning and pay him back in the evenings, as we do now. So there was faded gold and rose in the sky, though he himself was gone down.

'But apart from the birds and the bunnies, nothing happened except this great Transformation Scene of day turning into night, until it began to be dark. And then it seemed that almost every moment Old Joe, inch by inch, was steadily moving nearer. Seemed, mind you. And then, at the very instant when I noticed the first star—which by its mellow brightness and by where it was, must have been the planet Venus—I saw—well, now, what do you think I saw?'

'The fairy!' said Letitia, and sighed.

'Full marks, my dear,' said Mr. Bolsover, squeezing her hand under his elbow. 'The fairy. And the odd thing is that I can't—can't possibly—describe her. This is perhaps partly because the light wasn't very good, and partly because my eyes were strained with watching. But mostly for other reasons. I seemed, you see, to be seeing her as *if* I were imagining her, even though I knew quite well she was there.

'You must just take my word for it—I knew she was there. She was stooping forward a little, and the top of her head reached, I should say, about up to what one might call Old Joe's waist. There he is—say the third button down of that old black coat he has on. Her face seemed to be a little long and narrow, but perhaps this was because her fair hair was hanging down on either cheek, straight and fine as combed silk, and in colour between gold and grey—rather like the colour of a phosphorescent fish in the dark, but much more gold than silver. It looks to me, now I come to think of it, that since it was now gloaming I must have been seeing her in part as if by her own light.

'She stood lovely and motionless as a flower. And merely to gaze at her filled me with a happiness I shall not forget but cannot describe. It was as though I had come without knowing it into the middle of a dream in another world; and cold prickles went down my back, as if at the sound of enchanted music.

'There was not a breath of wind stirring. Everything around me seemed to have grown much more sharp and clear, even though the light was dim. The flowers were different, the trees, the birds. I seemed to know within me what the flowers were feeling—what it is like to be a plant with green pointed leaves and tiny caterpillar feet, like ivy, climbing from its white creeping roots in the dark earth by fractions of an inch, up the stem of a tree; or to have feathers all over me, and to float lighter than the air, and to be looking out from two small bright round eyes at my bird-world. I can't explain it, Letitia, but I am sure you will understand.'

Letitia gave two solemn nods. 'I *think* so, Uncle Tim—a little. Though I never should have guessed, you know, that any *boy* was like that.'

'Boys, my dear, are mainly animals,' Uncle Tim agreed heartily, 'and so was I—nine and three-quarter tenths. But it was the other bit, I suppose, that was looking at Old Joe.

'And I firmly believe that the fairy knew I was there, but that in spite of knowing it, she could not delay doing what she wished to do any longer. For presently, after a minute or two, she drew very gently backwards and out of sight, and then began to hasten away over the field towards the corner of it furthest away from me, keeping all the time as far as she was able so that Old Joe stood in between us, and so prevented me from seeing her clearly, however much I dodged my head from side to side in the attempt to do so. Now that, Letitia, considering that she had her back turned to me, and was flitting along as swiftly as a shadow—*that* was a very difficult thing to do; and I don't quite see how she managed it. I am perfectly certain *I* couldn't—without once looking back, I mean.'

'And what,' said Letitia, 'was she like from behind?'

Old Mr. Bolsover narrowed his eyes, and shut his lips. 'She was like,' he said slowly, 'a wraith of wood smoke from a bonfire. She was like what, if you could see it, you might suppose a puff of wind would be in the light over snow. She was like the ghost of a little waterfall. She moved, I mean, my dear, as if she were hovering on her way; and yet she never left the ground. Far, far more lightly than any gazelle she stepped; and it was so entrancing to watch her in the quiet and dusk of that great field, it fairly took my breath away. And mind you, I was only a clod-hopping boy of about ten.'

Mr. Bolsover took a large coloured silk handkerchief out of his pocket and, as if in triumph, blew his nose. 'I ought to add at once,' he continued, pushing the handkerchief back into his pocket again except for one bright coloured corner, 'that this is not a story at all. Not a story, Letitia.'

'But *I* think, Uncle Tim, it *is* a story,' said Letitia. 'It doesn't make stories any worse if they are *true*. I mean, don't you think, that all real stories seem better than true? Don't you think so yourself, Uncle Tim? Just think of the Seven Swans, and Snow White! Oh, all those. At least I do. Please, please go on.'

'What *I* mean, my dear, is that a story ought really to be like a piece of music. It should have a beginning and a middle and an end, though you could hardly say which is which when it all comes out together. It ought to be like a whiting with its tail in its mouth—but a live whiting, of course. This one, you see, this one I am telling you, begins—and then goes off into nothing.'

'I don't think,' said Letitia, 'that matters one atom. Just please go on with the fairy, Uncle Tim.'

'Well, as soon as she was gone out of sight, my one and only desire was to steal into the field and take a look at Old Joe at close quarters. But upon my word, Letitia, I hadn't the courage. He was *her* dwelling-place, her hiding-place, her habitation: at least whenever she needed one. That was certain. Now that she was absent, had forsaken it, had gone away, the very look of him had changed. He was empty, merely a husk; he was just nothing but a hodmadod—Old Joe. Though we won't think a bit the worse of him for that. Bless me, no! When *you* have gone daydreaming, your face, Letitia, I assure you, looks still and quiet and happy. But I am afraid you must be thinking I was an exceedingly stupid boy. You see, I *was*. And I confess that I simply could not make up my mind to go a step nearer.

'Old Joe was quite alone now. I wasn't afraid of *him*. But after what I had seen I felt a curious strangeness all about me. I was afraid because I felt I had been spying, and that every living thing within view under the quiet sky knew of this and wanted to be rid of my company. I didn't—which was worse—even go to look at my bird snare. And when I went to the field again it had vanished.

'Next morning after breakfast with my old friend Mrs. Lumb, I talked my way round until at last we came to fairies. "I sometimes wonder if they *can* be true," I said to her airily—as if I had just thought of it. Alas, Letitia, what deceivers we may be! But yes. My old friend believed in fairies all right. I never felt any doubt about that. But she had never seen one. I asked her what she thought a fairy would be like if she ever did see one. She sat in her chair—with her cup in her hand—looking out of the window and munching her toast.

"Well, between you and me, my dear Tim," she said (*crunch, crunch*), "I never much cared about the flibberti-gibbety little creatures which are supposed to find a water-lily as comfortable a place to sleep in as you might find a four-post bed. That, I think, is all my eye and Betty Martin. And I don't believe myself that any fairy would pay much attention to me (*crunch, crunch*). I expect (*crunch, crunch*) they prefer people, if they care for human beings at all, with less *of* and *to* them. And probably there are not many of them left in England now. Fairies, I mean. There are too many of *us*. Mr. Lumb, as you know, was an entomologist. Perhaps he would have been able to tell you more about it. Besides (*crunch, crunch*), he had once seen a ghost."

'Do you really mean,' said Letitia, 'that your friend Mrs. Lumb's *husband* had once seen a ghost, and that *he* was—was dead too?'

'That's what Mrs. Lumb meant, my dear, and I asked her what the ghost her husband saw was like. "Well," she said, "it was like (*crunch, crunch*) it was like, he told me, seeing something with your eyes shut. It made him feel very cold; the bedroom went black; but he wasn't frightened."

Letitia sidled yet a little closer to her uncle. 'Between you and me, Uncle Tim,' she said, 'I believe that ghost would have given me the shudders. Don't you? But please let's go back to your fairy. Did you tell Mrs. Lumb about that?'

'I never breathed so much as a single syllable, though if you were to ask me why, I couldn't say. It's just like small boys, I suppose; and small girls too, eh? They are dumplings, but keep the apple to themselves.'

'I think I'd have told just you, Uncle Tim,' said Letitia. 'And what happened then?'

'Two whole days went by before I ventured near the field again, though I doubt if an hour passed without my thinking of it. The birds in my memory seemed now to be stranger, wilder and lovelier creatures than I had ever realized. I even set free the two I had in small wooden cages—a linnet and a chaffinch—and for a while thought no more of traps and snaring. I loafed about wondering if all that I had seen might not have been mere fancy.

'And then on the third evening, I was so ashamed of myself that I determined to go down to the edge of the woods again and keep watch. This time I made my way to the upper corner of the field by the larch plantation, all in its fresh young green. It was there, as I supposed, I had seen the fairy vanish. The pheasants were crowing in their coverts, and the last birds were at evensong. I crept in between some elder bushes, and having made myself comfortable took out a little red and brass pocket telescope which my father had given me. Through this I hoped to be able to see clearly everything that might happen near Old Joe. It would bring him as close as if I could touch him with my hand. But when I came to put the telescope to my eye I found that one of the lenses was broken.

'It was a little later in the evening than on my first visit, and though the skies were still burning, the sun had set. But my legs were all pins and needles, and my eyes nearly gone black with staring on and on, before I saw anything out of the common.

'And then, Letitia, all of a sudden I knew not only that the fairy was there again but also that again she was aware she was being watched. Yes, and though I had seen not the least stir or motion in Old Joe, she had already stolen out of her hiding-place and was steadily and *openly* gazing across the first faint green flush of the sprouting wheat in my direction. I held my breath and tried in vain to keep myself from shivering.

'For a moment or two she hesitated, then turned as before, and sped away, but now towards the very thorn tree from which I had first spied out on her. I was bitterly disappointed, *angry* and—well, I suppose it would be a queer boy who had nothing of the old hunter in him. It was clear she was pitting her wits against mine. And just as, though I was devoted to the wild birds, I would sometimes shake my fist at them and almost howl with rage when I saw one steal my bait without falling into the trap I had set, so I felt now.

'But I was stiff and aching, and it was too late to attempt to try and intercept her now. *You wait!* thought I to myself, next time we'll see who's craftiest. So I shut up my telescope, brushed the dead leaves from my clothes, stayed till life came back into my leg, and then rather sulkily went home.

'That night was still and warm though April was not over yet. And while I was undressing a full moon began to rise. In spite of the candlelight I could see it shining through my bedroom blind. I blew out my candle, drew up the blind and looked out of the window, and the world looked as if it were enchanted—like an old serpent that has sloughed its skin. It seemed the moon shed silence as well as light. And though I was there in my old friend Mrs. Lumb's familiar house—wood and brick and stone—it was as if no human being had ever looked out of her window like this before. And—even better, Letitia. The same feeling came over me when I had first caught sight of that Old Joe there. Just as the fairy had been aware of me watching her in the fields, so I was sure now that she was concealing herself not very far from the house and—watching my window.'

'It *does* seem odd, Uncle Tim,' said Letitia. 'Isn't that *curious!* I know exactly what you mean. It's just as if there were things in the air, *telling* people, isn't it! And did—did you go out?'

'To tell you the truth, Letitia, no. I didn't. I didn't dare to, though it was not because I was afraid. No; I stood watching at the window until presently a bird began to sing, out of the warm hollow darkness away from the moon. It may have been a nightingale, as there was a hurst or thicket of common land not far from the house which was the resort of nightingales in the summer. Still, it was very early in the year. The song I heard was fully as sweet and musical as theirs, and yet it seemed less the song of a bird than—well, than even the song of a nightingale seems. A strange happiness and mournfulness came over me, listening to it. And even when I got to bed it was a long time before the echo of it had faded out in memory, and I fell asleep.

'Can it have been, do you think, that the fairy was beseeching me not to come to her haunts any more? I can't tell. But in my stupidity I persisted in persecuting her, just as I had persisted in persecuting the birds. I was too stupid, you see, to realize that my company in her field might be as disquieting to her as it would be for us if, when we had a few nice solid

friends to tea, she came too.'

'Oh, Uncle Tim, if only she would! Then we wouldn't ask a single soul to tea for months and months and months. Would we?'

'No,' said Mr. Bolsover. 'But it's no good denying it, she wouldn't. They don't. We ourselves may wish, even pine, to see them; but I don't think, Letitia, they pine to see us. And I am quite sure she didn't want a clod-hopping, bird-trapping boy spying about in her field. Old Joe was not only roof and house, but company enough; and her own solitude.'

'None the less, my dear, I met her face to face. And this is how it happened. It was the day before I had to go home again, and two or three other visits to the field had been entirely in vain. I could tell by now almost at a glance at Old Joe whether she was here or not. Just as you could tell at a glance at me if *I* were here or not. I don't mean merely my body and bones—eyes, nose, boots and so on; but the me which is really and truly—well, just me.'

'Yes,' said Letitia.

'Well, she never was. And this particular evening I was in as black and sullen a temper as a small boy can be. I was full of aches and pains owing no doubt to my being so stupid as to lie on the ground under the bushes after rain. Night after night too, I had lain awake for hours. It seemed that the fairy had forsaken the field. It seemed that all my cunning and curiosity and hope and longing had been in vain. I scowled at Old Joe as if he were to blame. Just vanity and stupidity.'

'Besides, my old friend Mrs. Lumb had discovered somehow that I was creeping late into the house while she was at dinner; and though she never scolded me, it was quite easy to know when she was displeased at anything. And she could smile at you with her nice red apple-dumpling cheeks and black eyes, and be pretty tart of tongue at the same time.'

'There's a mistress at school,' cried Letitia, 'called Miss Jennings that's just like that; though she's not very fat. At least, not yet. And then?... You saw her, Uncle Tim?'

'Yes, I saw her—face to face. I was making my way back through the copse at the upper corner of the field where two hedges met at the end of a narrow green lane. And as I came stumping along I suddenly went cold all over, and I firmly believe my cap had pushed itself up a little on the top of my head, owing to the hair underneath it trying to stand on end.'

'I can't even tell you what she was wearing, but as I recall her at this moment it was as if she were veiled about with a haze like that of a full moon—like bluebells at a little distance in a dingle of a wood. That may or may not be, but I quite clearly saw her face, for I was staring steadily into her eyes. They too were blue, like the blue of flames in a wood fire, especially when there is salt in it, or the wood has come from some old ship, with copper in it. Her hair was hanging on either side her head in a long strand from brow to chin, and down the narrow shoulder. All else in the world I had completely forgotten. I was alone, an ugly small awkward human animal looking, as if into a dream, into those strange unearthly eyes.'

'There was not the smallest movement between us; not the least stir in her face that she knew me or recognized me or reproached me or feared me. But as I looked—how can I possibly describe it?—there did come a faint far-away change in her eyes. It was as though while you might be looking out to sea some summer's evening from a high window or from the edge of a cliff, a flight of distant sea-birds should appear out of the blue and vanish into it again. We poor mortals can smile with our eyes only—and that's a much better smile than with the lips only. But not like that. This was *her* way of smiling at *me*. Just as the angels on the ladder might have had their way of smiling at Jacob—with his sleeping head on the stone. And I doubt if they smile often. It told me in my heart of hearts that she was not unfriendly to me; and yet that she was entreating me to come no more and trespass near her lair. What she was doing in this world, how much alone she was, and where and with whom she was when not in my parts, near Mrs. Lumb's, I can't say. All she was *telling* me was that she meant me no harm but begged me not to spy on her or watch her any more. After all, what right had I to do so—quite apart from manners? And then she was gone.'

'Oh, *gone!*' said Letitia, and stooped her head suddenly.

'You see, it was easy to take hiding in the evening shadow of the woods, and the field hedges were dense. Yes, she was gone, my dear, and I have never seen her since, nor anything resembling her.... But there, as I have said already,' added

old Mr. Bolsover, 'you can't call *that* a story.' He was blinking at his small niece like an owl caught out in the morning sun. Letitia remained silent for a few moments.

'But I *do* call it a story, Uncle Tim,' she said at last. 'And oh, how I wish.... Still, it's no good saying that. But then what about Old Joe, that Old Joe *there*, Uncle Tim?'

'Ah, Old Joe! Him, the old rascal! The fact of the matter is I never forgot that evening. Years and years afterwards—and I must have been a young man by then—say twenty or so—I stayed a night or two with my old friend Mrs. Lumb again. She, alas, was older too; and so no doubt was her cook. But that was the only difference. The first walk I took alone was to the field under the woods, and about the time of sunset. Would you believe it, there was Old Joe in his usual place, though the barley crop he was watching over that particular summer was now well above his knees. And whether it was because I myself was changed, or whether the fairy had long since forsaken her hiding-place, or whether really and truly he was merely her way of getting into and out of our world, who can say?

'However that may be, Old Joe looked'—Mr. Bolsover lowered his voice—'well precisely, Letitia, between you and me, as he looks now: a little vacant-like, empty, accustomed to being alone. He had brand-new clothes on then, too, standing up there in his barley, and an immeasurably old wide-brimmed hat, just the kind of hat that might once have belonged to old Mr. Hiawatha Longfellow—the kind of hat, I mean, that nobody but a poet would wear, and not unless he had a long white beard to match. And what do you think I did?'

'You didn't go and *steal* him, Uncle Tim?' whispered Letitia.

'No, Letitia. What I can't help thinking was much worse, I went and bought him,' said Uncle Tim; 'though "bought" is not the word I should say out loud. I went straight off to the old farmer—old Farmer Jones—still as stout as he used to be, but with his whiskers all gone grey, and asked him how much he would take for his hodmadod in the barley field, just as a curiosity. I told him I had known Old Joe as a boy, that there was an old friendship between us. There sat the old farmer in his great wheel-back chair in his kitchen—as fat as a porpoise, with his large mulberry-red face and eyes like bits of agate. He sat there merely staring at me for a time, as if he thought I was a lunatic.

""Well, that's a good 'un," he said at last. And what do you think he charged?'

Letitia pondered, her eyes fixed on the grass at her feet, though they were blinking so fast she couldn't have been thinking very clearly. 'I suppose,' she said, 'five pounds would be a good deal, wouldn't it, Uncle Tim? Even for Old Joe? Though of course,' she added, as if old Mr. Bolsover had suddenly gone much further off, 'even then it would be *strordinarily* cheap.'

'No. Guess again, my dear. Nothing like five pounds! Nothing like tuppence, even. "Give me a pipe of that plug baccy of yours," said the old farmer, "and he's yours for ever."

'So mine he was. And I'm glad it wasn't money.'

'So am I,' said Letitia. 'Baccy doesn't hurt your feelings, Uncle Tim, I suppose; does it? And ... and you never saw the—the fairy again?'

'In a way of speaking,' old Mr. Bolsover replied, 'I have never, Letitia, really *seen* anything else. It's a question of what one means exactly by "seeing", I suppose. Words are no use. It can't be done, can it?'

Letitia shook her head violently. 'No, Uncle Tim, it can't be done,' she said, and fell silent again.

The low wide-windowed house, with its jasmine and clematis, crouched in the light and heat of the sun, as if it had been listening all this while. Tiny butterflies, like pale scraps of the blue sky, were circling and flitting over the flowers. The bells from their belfry in the stone tower of the village church, muffled by the leafy woods between, sounded sweet and solemn in the summer air. It was so still the great world might have stopped spinning.

And there, half in shadow of his grey-green willows, black in his old clothes, shocking hat over one eyebrow and one lank arm aloft, stood the scarecrow; and never stirred. Nor did he seem to be wishing for company. Hiding-place he may

have been once (as might a bee long ago have taken possession of old Mr. Bolsover's bonnet), but whatever visitor had come, had gone. Letitia turned her head at last to look up into the old man's face.

'What I believe myself, Uncle Tim,' she began again, in a voice so low it was almost as if she were talking to herself, 'what I believe myself, and I am sure you won't mind my saying so—I believe it was almost as if you must have fallen in love with that fairy. Was that it, Uncle Tim, do you think?'

'Ah!' replied old Mr. Bolsover, and sat there blinking in the sunlight. Then, 'Goodness me!' he muttered almost as if to himself, 'I can smell that apple charlotte now, even above the pinks!... I'll tell you what, Letitia. It's high time we stirred our stumps. We'll go over and ask Old Joe!...'

[End of *The Scarecrow* by Walter de la Mare]