

Characters

Narrator (M/F)

Constable (M/F)

Will (M/F)

Prize Fighter (M)

Wench (F)

Farmer Hollingsworth (M/F)

Magistrate (M/F)

Scene 1

Narrator: It's the same every year; spoilsports writing to The Herald, saying Ilson Fair should be stopped. Writing letters with long words like - licentiousness and profligacy, whatever they mean; with phrases such as - hot headed recklessness and roads to ruination; with whole sentences, grumbling - 'A visit to the Fair is like catching a glimpse of Sodom and Gomorrah.' I don't read too good, but my pal Will, is reading these things out to me. Waiting for our case to come up in court, the constable had handed us his copy of the Herald.

Constable: To improve your minds.

Narrator: You're probably wondering what crime we've committed to be in the custody of a constable; thieving, pick-pocketing, murder? No; it's just for having the best possible time at Ilson's Michaelmas Hiring Fair!

Narrator: What I says is, those who grouse, don't know how to enjoy themselves! But it's not only me who says it; it's everyone crammed into the snug of 'The Fastening Penny'. The inn's named after the 'fest money' employers give to seal their hiring bargains, whether it be a shepherd, cowman, pigman or milkmaid, maid servant, young lads, or agricultural labourers, like me and Will. Folks use their fest money to sup. As well as that, we get our year end pay from our last employer. In the snug there's folk on the stools and on the benches; there's folk under the benches, and on the tables, and folk on the window ledges. And they've all had a darned good time; though some be groaning a bit now!

Narrator: Now you may be wondering why we're all under arrest in the snug? Shouldn't we be in the jail? Yes, we should; but that's so crowded with merrymakers, that last night, the constables had to use the snug. They locked door of course. Normally this would have been a delight; if we hadn't supped the place dry.

Narrator: Old Michaelmas, the 23rd November! You should see the town at night! Gas lamps on and lanterns hung in the shop windows. As you pass the dazzling delights in the street are reflected again and again; the coconut shy, the golden gallopers, the distorting mirrors - oh and the cakewalk; have five pots of ale and try the cakewalk! Then there are the side shows; the twins joined at the hip; the eight-foot giant; the two headed woman; lion man. And you'd never heard so much noise; what with the screaming of the wenches on the carousel, the clarion sounds of the brass band, the cries of 'Hot Chestnuts', the gossipy gabbling of the geese, the disapproving clucking of the hens. And the smells - a whole ox being roast; fresh baked bread hot and yeasty; ale overflowing. When it's a clear night, I think of all the sounds and sights and smells, going straight up to heaven through the stars. It's enough to make even the angels jealous.

Narrator: Will has been reading out snippets from the Herald about the Boer War to anyone awake. He looks up,

Will: I wish I could go to war, Tom.

Narrator: And fight for Queen Victoria and country, says I.

Will: I'd give 'em what for.

Narrator: Me too, says I. Then comes a mocking voice,

Prize Fighter: Oh, you would, would you?

Will: Yes, we would!

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Narrator: Says Will, growing red in the face, and up for a collie shangles. As a great head appears from under the bench, Will takes one eyeful of the battered face of the prize fighter, and changes his mind.

Narrator: A few seconds in the ring with the prize fighter was the most anyone had managed, before they came flying over the ropes. But we lads all had to have a go, and were keen on getting a bit o' practice. A feature of the Hiring Fair, is it's a time to settle old scores. If you've been wanting to tip someone in the cattle trough for eleven month, that's your time. Thing is, before you know it, everyone's scrapping; especially after a few pots of ale. That's when the constable and his men came and steered us all into the snug.

Narrator: Noticing the wheat ears in our caps, the prize fighter says,

Prize Fighter: You pair not been hired then?

Narrator: The wheat ears were a sign of our trade. If we'd been hired, we'd have blue ribbons.

Narrator: It's a bit of a blur, says I.

Prize Fighter: You'd best remember if you have, or it'll be workhouse for the pair of you.

Will: We've some good offers.

Narrator: The prize fighter, retreating below the bench again to sleep, says,

Prize Fighter: Offers won't fill your belly,

Narrator: A wench sitting against a wall with a milking pail, and holding her head says,

Wench: So, you've been playing the old trick, eating all and drinking all, and not taking their fest money!

Narrator: She'd a blue ribbon in her mop hat, which meant she'd been hired.

- Narrator:** The milkmaid had hit the nail on the head. The routine was, if a farmer saw you were for hire, and liked the look of you, he'd invite you for a drink. If he was generous, a hot dinner would go with it. However, when the farmer wanted to secure the bargain with a fest penny, usually a shilling, the old trick was, you'd touch your hat, wish him 'Good Day' and say you'd think on it. You could get a lot of free sups and a happy bellyful of hot dinners if you were crafty.
- Narrator:** Oh, don't go feeling sorry for the farmers; they're rich, and us agricultural labourers like rooks in winter. Why we haven't even a tailor to pay this year end, because we can't afford new. Farmer Hollingsworth's 'hand me downs' is what we're wearing; clopping around like carthorses in boots too big. We used to get terrible blisters on our feet, but our skins are like leather now. Mind you they crack something rotten in winter.
- Narrator:** Farmer Hollingsworth is the man who's kept us busy these last three year. Me and Will can't seem to get away from his farm. He's a proper skinflint. Each Michaelmas, when he asks if we're stopping on, we answer, 'If you give us another two pound a year.' Up at 5 a.m., bed at 10p.m., and we're hard workers. But each year, he doesn't answer, and goes off whistling, and each October, we pack our bags and get ourselves off to the Hiring Fair. Not that we'd miss it for the world. It's the one bright spark in the whole year.
- Narrator:** Somehow though, after each fair with all our carousing, and supping, and not being hired, he'd find us and say,
- Hollingsworth:** I'll take you back on your old wages. Count yourselves lucky my lads!
- Narrator:** And we'd get in his cart, tails between our legs, like two stray sheepdogs. The constable comes in and points at us now.
- Constable:** You pair - courtroom, at the double.
- Narrator:** For being drunk and disorderly, we are charged a shilling apiece. We feel in our empty pockets when the magistrate asks,
- Magistrate:** How do you intend to pay?
- Narrator:** This is usually the point at which Farmer Hollingsworth appears, pays our fine and carts us off for another year. It comes out of our wages of course.
- Narrator:** We turn around, but he isn't there. We stare down at our boots. There's nothing else for it; we'll have to pawn them or go to jail. Removing one boot, I recognise a cough from the back of the court. With a heavy heart I realize Farmer Hollingsworth has arrived, and that we've missed our chance to better our situation for another year. But just as he starts to speak, Will yells,

Will: Wait - I can pay. Standing in his socks, full of spud holes, everyone watches as he extracts a silver shilling from his left boot. In my boot I find the same.

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Narrator: Outside and free men, Will says,

Will: That fat farmer with the ruddy cheeks – he must have shoved our fest money in our boots. He put the ribbon in there an’ all. I think he offered us the extra two pounds, but maybe I dreamt it!

Narrator: So, we had been hired! But, if we didn’t know his name or his farm, how could we get there to work? Reading my thoughts, Will waves a small piece of paper at me. Will can make sense of a map. We tie the laces tight on our clodhoppers, and with one last look behind at the fair, begin to walk.