

# Sketch in India Ink

Hjalmar Söderberg

One April day many years ago, at a time when I still wondered about the meaning of life, I went into a little cigar store on a back street to buy a cigar. I selected a dark and square El Zelo, put it in my cigar case, paid for it, and prepared to leave. But all of a sudden it occurred to me to show the young girl, who worked in the store and from whom I usually bought my cigars, a little sketch in India ink that I happened to have in my wallet. I had gotten it from a young artist and in my opinion it was very beautiful. "Look," I said and handed it to her. "What do you think of this?"

She took it in her hands with a curious interest and looked at it for a long time very closely. She turned it around in all directions and her face held an expression of concentrated thought. "Well, what does it mean?" she asked at last with an eager glance.

I was caught a bit off guard. "I doesn't mean anything in particular," I answered. "It is only a landscape. This is land and that is sky and that is a road...an ordinary road..."

"Of course I see that," she hissed in a fairly unfriendly tone, "but I want to know what it means."

I stood there bewildered and at a loss. I had never thought that it ought to mean something. But this idea of hers could not be shaken. She had assumed that the picture must be some sort of "find the cat." Why else would I have shown it to her? At last she put it against the windowpane so it became transparent. Presumably, someone had once shown her some sort of peculiar playing card that under normal light looks like a nine of diamonds or a jack of spades, but which when held against the light, represents something obscene.

But her examination brought no results. She returned the sketch and I prepared to leave. Then the poor girl suddenly became very red and burst out with tears in her voice: "Shame! It's not very nice of you to make a fool of me like this. I know very well that I am a poor girl who hasn't been able to afford any education, but that doesn't mean you should make fun of me. Can't you tell me what your picture means?"

What should I answer? I would have given a great deal to be able to tell her what it meant, but I couldn't, because it did not mean anything.

Yes, it is now many years since then. Now I smoke different cigars and buy them in a different store, and I no longer wonder about the meaning of life, but that is not because I think I have found it.