SEVEN BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

ALFRED NOYES'S "TALES OF THE MERMAID INN"*

The critical commonplace about Mr. Alfred Noyes's *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern* is that he portrays the Elizabethan period and the writing, fighting, adventurous London that was then. And this, like many commonplaces, is a half-truth none the worse for winnowing. Certainly, in the sense of representing these spacious times as their own literature presented them, the book is not Elizabethan at all: there is hardly a page in it which could have been written before 1850, or which is not unmistakably dated as modern by form and prosody and style.

> Marchaunt Adventurers, O what 'ull ye bring home again?
> Woonders and works and the thunder of the sea!
> Whom will ye traffic with? The King of the sunset!—
> What shall be your pilot, then?— A wind from Galilee!

*Tales of the Mermaid Inn. By Alfred Noyes. New York: F. A. Stokes Company.

—Nay, but ye be marchaunts, will ye come back empty-handed?—
Ay, we be marchaunts, though our gain we ne'er shall see!
Cast we now our bread upon the waste wild waters;
After many days it shall return with usury.

Chorus:

Marchaunt Adventurers,
Marchaunt Adventurers,
What shall be your profit in the mighty days to be?
Englande! Englande! Englande! Englande!
Glory everlasting, and the lordship of the sea.

There is no need to argue about it, or even to point out the demonstrative details: the Elizabethans did not write like that. They did not versify like that either; nor, so far as we of this late day have any means of judging, did they think like that. But this subtler question demands a little more analysis.

"Thy Summer's Night—eh, Will? Midsummer's Night?—
That's a quaint fancy," Bacon droned anew,
"But— Athens was an error, Will! Not Athens!
Titania knew not Athens! Those wild elves
Of thy Midsummer's Dream— eh? Midnight's Dream?—
Are English all. Thy woods, too, smack of England;
They never grew round Athens. Bottom, too,
He is not Greek!"
"Greek?" Will said, with a chuckle,
"Bottom a Greek? Why, no, he was the son
Of Marian Hacket, the fat wife that kept
An ale-house, Wincot-way. I lodged with her
Walking from Stratford. You have never tramped
Along that country side? By Burton Heath?
Ah, well, you would not know my fairy-lands.
It warms my blood to let my home-spuns play
Around your cold white Athens. There's a joy
In jumping time and space."

Now, here is a thoroughly modern bit of criticism, albeit spoken in character. Bacon might well enough have so objected, and Shakespeare so answered—if the idea had ever occurred to them; but we may doubt its occurrence to the Bacon who, for all his learning, calls the Witch of Endor a "Pythonissa" and quotes his Homer in Vergilian Latin, or to the Shakespeare who, both as poet and as manager, costumed all times alike. It is Mr. Noyes who feels a joy in jumping time and space, and who shares with us that pleasure: the Elizabethans, in a manner of speaking, dwelt as gods outside and unconscious of time; and Shakespeare could never have written *Bacchus and the Pirates,* precisely because in his mind they would have met as naturally as Touchstone and Hymen. This conjuring with great names borrows its whole enchantment from distance: it is wonderful for us to sit at table among great names which have already outworn the drums and trampings of three hundred years; but for themselves there was no such wonder. Wings are not wonderful to angels; and it is obvious, though inconceivable, that elephants do not feel elephantine. What Mr. Noyes has done, therefore, is more than merely to imitate Elizabethan verse or to attempt a futile realism of archeology. He is a poet, not a fabricator of antiques; and his creation is our own vision (and his) of the Mermaid Tavern, a new light and life upon a tradition grown great in growing old: a transfiguration of those souls of poets dead and gone in bodies not the same but glorified by centuries of imagining. What the Elizabethan Age thought of itself we see darkly through the glass of its own literature; to that nothing can ever be added; it is done. What the Elizabethan Age actually was in daily fact we cannot possibly know; it is gone, erased, dissolved into oblivion. But what the Elizabethan Age is now, for us, is another and a living thing, as real as a dream and as immortal as a soul;

and in recreating this Elizabethan Age of ours, Mr. Noyes has done again what Shakespeare did for the ancient Rome and Athens of his own day. And that, after all, is the only thing that really matters. We are concerned with past times and distant places only as they exist for us: with the present connotation of words like "Elizabethan" or "Athenian" or "mediæval"; with the traditional personalities of Alexander and Cleopatra and Cæsar and Hamlet and George Washington; for these are now a portion of our thought and an influence upon our living, whereas that which they actually were has long ceased to exist. Thus the Middle Ages of Scott and Victor Hugo, the Pompeii of Bulwer-Lytton, may be historically quite inaccurate; nobody really knows or ever will; but they are at least alive among us, and the facts are dead. Indeed, in a certain sense, these fictions are truer to the life than was that very life itself. Cæsar and Lincoln were in fact something more than they or their contemporaries knew: their future fame was part of them. It is no quibble to say of the actual Hamlet or Macbeth that their chief historical act was to furnish material for Shakespeare. And the whole truth about those gatherings at the Mermaid could not have been apparent to themselves, precisely because it has taken time to prove their greatness: there sat the characters of a poem which would not be written until the year nineteen hundred and twelve.

And in this imaginative embodying of the Elizabethan spirit as it has come down to us, this holding up of the mirror to our romantic and traditional sense of what the Mermaid must have been, these poems are marvellously successful. The book has that cross-section effect, as of a world created, which is the hallmark of a few great novels: that sense of a window opened upon a bright and busy scene wherein every sharp detail suggests unobserved complexities and more is felt than meets the eye. You have this feeling about the India of *Kim,* the Paris of *Notre Dame,* the Georgian society of *Vanity Fair;* but it is a very rare thing to find it in a poem. Mr. Noyes's own *Drake,* for example, with all its fertility of gorgeous images, had no charm to unseal these magic casements. The *Faerie Queene* is perhaps the best example of the quality in English—if we except Shakespeare's creations of Bohemia and Arden. And the method by which this feeling is produced is a remarkable development of one of the first devices of literary craftsmanship—the device of going back into romance for the origin of something immediately familiar to the reader. It is that formula of the folk-tale which begins with the long nose of the elephant or the short tail of the bear, and tells a story to account for it: "and if you doubt the story, just look at the next elephant you see." The conjuring with great names, of which I have already spoken, is a part of this; the very title of the volume is a case in point; and the device is worked out imaginatively in a myriad of details, a gold thread woven through the poems to give the texture brilliancy. We meet with "brick-layer Ben"—

> **The T, for Tyburn, branded on his thumb,—**

and the mention of that mark is like a credential and an identification. Some of us recognise it; others are informed so casually that they feel reminded. It is as simple as an inference of Sherlock Holmes—and as bewilderingly effective. These allusions, moreover, are not hung upon the work like tags, but imagined keenly and emotionally; they are the very stuff of which the dream is made.

> **I fitted her with morrice-bells, with treble, bass and tenor bells;**
> **The fore-bells, as I linked them at her throat, how soft they sang!**
> **Green linnets in a golden nest, they chirped and trembled on her breast,**
> **And, faint as elfin blue-bells, at her nut-brown ankles rang.**

Analyse that, after you have done merely enjoying it: try to resolve the elements of learning and artistry and sentiment;

see how information is informed with melody, how in the blending and modelling of all, one line will help the poem in various ways, how the brain serves the heart. And you will suspect why the old tradition of the world paid poets the honour of astonishment. For the test of any true creation is that the more you examine it and dissect and discover and understand, the more material you have for wonder.

To attempt a critical appraisal of this book within the limits of a page or two would be somewhat unsatisfactory and perhaps a little premature; for there is too much in it, both for better and for worse, to encourage the superficial balancing of a fault here against a merit there in the endeavour to anticipate posterity. Rather it has seemed of interest to approach a single phase of its craftsmanship in the character more of an observer than of a judge. There is many another phase of equal interest; and to one such in particular it is worth while to call attention. If any single book might comprehend and settle for all time that long-disputed question of morality and art, then that book is the *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern*. It is all here, precept and example and illustration: for whomsoever will really read; the matter is concluded. But how and why these poems have offered a conclusion must be left for the nonce to the observation of the reader.

Brian Hooker.