THEY WENT

THEY WENT. *By Norman Douglas. 12mo. 274 pages. Dodd, Mead and Company. New York.*

IT is a comment upon our book vendors that at present it appears impossible to find that earlier novel of Norman Douglas, South Wind, in their shops—that this book should have been allowed to sink into the oblivion of store-rooms so easily. They Went, having some way secured a general distribution on the counters, has met already with such favourable reviews as are allotted the charming, the graceful, the fantastic, and thus it may serve to rediscover the earlier and more important work.[1]

In They Went, Mr Douglas has left even the most exotic phases of our modern civilization, and gone into those regions, vaguely dated, vaguely placed, where his fancy can pick and choose what it will of the historic and the legendary. It is a story of a city and its king and queen and their daughter, and other occasional persons who distract the princess at odd times away from her parents, as a young girl is apt to be distracted. For though only nineteen she is a precocious girl with ideas of her own. Her putative father's kingdom, one gathers, is rather far north, where are dim rainbows and mists and resentful seas, as well as druids, dwarfs, and a missionary or two sent from Ireland to inquire into certain carryings-on which have been talked about in Christian countries. His majesty, well along now in years, is content with the ways of peace and to allow his daughter to use his capital as her plaything, which she does with a zest to be commended, if somewhat startling to the suburban student of mankind with only his neighbours for his own laboratorial experimentation. This city was, we are told,

"a democratic mart, an emporium and outpost of civilization; a gaudy place inhabited by folks of the same kind—exiled rulers and generals, high-class reprobates, merchants, enriched slaves, artizans of uncommon capacity who, for some reason or other, had to leave their homes. Folks who had money to spend! They flocked hither

[1] Appreciated and reviewed, if all in vain, by the present Editor of THE DIAL, August 15, 1918.

from every part of the world, assured of the protection and encouragement of the princess. No questions were asked how he or she lived. No one was discouraged from settling in this town, whose reputation for vice was such that lovers of pleasure had been known to desert even their Mediterranean capitals for the sake of the peculiar attractions they found here. An air of good humour pervaded those thronged streets."

Such a city, even as more reputable towns, has an ever-threatening peril. In this case it is a very definite doom. A key hanging on the king's girdle can unlock a sluice and admit the pressing sea and bring about the total destruction of the place. Thus as one by one the persons in the story, the lovers of the precocious princess, the king's minstrels, the Christians had come and gone—so the city vanishes at the end. They pleased, they grew wearisome, they went. "They went" is the book's refrain.

Mr Douglas possesses that sophistication, disillusionment, cynicism—call it what you will from your back porches—which comes from such intimate and varied contact—one feels it can come only thus—with the human performance as to allow the ease of familiarity with its distortions. We come. We go. And in the meantime we are not all we should be. Mr Douglas can face the idea with equanimity. He can be facetious about it. It starches his wit nobly. He shrugs shoulders at the aspirations of the senile, sodden king who "like all sensible men had no objection to becoming, as it were, immortal." Of the Roman missionary's God he remarks that "he not only had a reputation to preserve, but unlike many others, a knack of invariably preserving it."

A number of remarkable persons are involved in the story of the last days of the city. No one can pass through without the intaglio mark of definite individuality. One gets a hint of the most casual lover the princess has had occasion to drop down the Great Drain, and in spite of her ballet-princess disposition this young lady herself has a strange humanity in her restlessness, her resentment that this plaything city is never quite the beautiful affair she wills to make it.

But the most seriously treated, the least bizarre characters, are the arch-druidess Manthis and the Greek artist Theophilus. Manthis was "the repository of the lore and learning of her time, and men were sometimes disposed to call her conservative, or even reaction-

ary"—yet Manthis was not quite so convinced about things as she professed to be.

" 'One gropes,' she would often admit to herself; sometimes even adding: 'perhaps one gropes in a groove.' . . . Manthis loved not beauty, but betterment. . . . *'Woman need only want'* was a favourite axiom of hers. She called it a 'pleasant discovery.' "

Theophilus can realize for the princess with his skill her concept of the beautiful city—or rather it is *his* concept, as his vision takes hold of her. The price he asks for his services is the life of the Christian missionary, because, he says, " 'Between goodness and beauty there yawns a gulf which none can bridge over. Uphill work, princess, trying to make men strive after beauty and rise aloft. It is so much easier to make them good, to keep them grovelling earthwards, that sometimes I think that I, too, will grow into a preacher in my old age. . . . We have enemies enough without him (this Christian)—the All-Highest, I mean, and that red-haired papa of yours. They are leagued together like all good folks for the destruction of beauty. Envy makes strange bed-fellows.' " And at last—" 'A portico is worth a preacher,' " agrees the princess. But it is this same Theophilus who exclaims as the seas overwhelm the unfinished city: " 'It breaks me, to watch the agony of fair things.' "

The Princess however and the Greek flee the catastrophe to begin again their building elsewhere. And Manthis looking from her island tower . . . "it dawned upon her that she would now be free from many kinds of annoyances, free to develop her own ideas of betterment, free to introduce or abolish as she saw fit."—In fact such a calm acceptance of the disaster gives to the book that note of the happy ending the editorial people talk about so much.

JOHN MOSHER