

WALKING SHADOWS

SEA TALES AND OTHERS

BY

ALFRED NOYES



NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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WALKING SHADOWS

WORKS BY ALFRED NOYES

COLLECTED POEMS—2 *Vols.*

THE LORD OF MISRULE

A BELGIAN CHRISTMAS EVE (RADA)

THE WINE-PRESS

WALKING SHADOWS—*Prose*

OPEN BOATS

TALES OF THE MERMAID TAVERN

SHERWOOD

THE ENCHANTED ISLAND AND OTHER
POEMS

DRAKE: AN ENGLISH EPIC

Prelude

Of those who fought and died
Unreckoned, undescried,
 Breaking no hearts but two or three that
 loved them;
Of multitudes that gave
Their memories to the grave,
 And the unrevealing seas of night removed
 them;
Of those unnumbered hosts
Who smile at all our boasts
 And are not blazed on any scroll of glory;
Mere out-posts in the night,
Mere keepers of the light,
 Where history stops, let shadows weave a
 story.

Shadows, but ah, they know
That history's pomp and show
 Are shadows of a shadow, gilt and painted.
They see the accepted lie
In robes of state go by.
 They see the prophet stoned, the trickster
 sainted.

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WALKING SHADOWS

I

THE LIGHT-HOUSE

THE position of a light-house keeper, in a sea infested by submarines, is a peculiar one; but Peter Ramsay, keeper of the *Hatchets' Light*, had reasons for feeling that his lonely tower, six miles from the mainland, was the happiest habitation in the world.

At five o'clock, on a gusty October afternoon, of the year 1916, Peter had just finished his tea and settled down, with a pipe and the last number of the *British Weekly*, for five minutes' reading, before he turned to the secret of his happiness again. Precisely at this moment, the Commander of the U-99, three miles away to the north, after making sure through his periscope that there were no patrol boats in the vicinity, rose to the surface, and began to look for the *Hatchets'*. He, too, had reasons for wishing to get inside the light-house, if

only for half an hour. It was possible only by trickery; but he thought it might be done under cover of darkness, and he was about to reconnoiter.

When he first emerged, he had some difficulty in descrying his goal across that confused sea. His eye was guided by a patch of foam, larger than the ordinary run of white-caps, and glittering in the evening sun like a black-thorn blossom. As the sky brightened behind it, he saw, rising upright, like the single slim pistil of those rough white petals, the faint shaft of the light-house itself.

He stole nearer, till these pretty fancies were swallowed up in the savagery of the place. It greeted him with a deep muffled roar as of a hundred sea-lions, and the air grew colder with its thin mists of spray. The black thorns and white petals became an angry ship-wrecking ring of ax-headed rocks, furious with surf; and the delicate pistil assumed the stature of the Nelson Column.

It made his head reel to look up at its firm height from the tossing conning-tower, as he circled the reef, making his observations. He noted the narrow door, twenty feet up, in the smooth wall of the shaft. There was no way

of approaching it until the rope-ladder was let down from within. But, after midnight, when the custodian's wits might be a little drowsy, he thought his plan might succeed. He noted the pool on the reef, and the big boulder near the base of the tower. There was only one thing which he did not see, an unimportant thing in war-time. He did not see the beauty of that unconscious monument to the struggling spirit of man.

Its lofty silence and endurance, in their stern contrast with the tumult below, had touched the imagination of many wanderers on that sea; for it soared to the same sky as their spires on land, and its beauty was heightened by the simplicity of its practical purpose. But it made no more impression on Captain Bernstein than on the sea-gulls that mewed and swooped around it.

When his observations were completed, the U-99 sheered off and submerged. She had to lie "doggo," at the bottom of the sea, for the next few hours; and there were several of her sisters waiting, a mile or so to the north, on a fine sandy bottom, to compare notes. Two of these sisters were big submarine mine-layers of a new type. The U-99 settled down

near them, and began exchanging under-water messages at once.

"If you lay your mines properly, and lie as near as possible to the harbor mouth, you can leave the rest to me. They will come out in a hurry, and you ought to sink two-thirds of them." This was the final message from Captain Bernstein; and, shortly after eight o'clock, all the other submarines moved off, in the direction of the coast. The U-99 remained in her place, till the hour was ripe.

About midnight, she came to the surface again. Everything seemed propitious. There were no patrols in sight; and, in any case, Captain Bernstein knew that they seldom came within a mile of the light-house, for ships gave it a wide berth, and there was not likely to be good hunting in the neighborhood. This was why the U-boats had found it so useful as a rendezvous lately.

It was a moonless night; and, as the U-99 stole towards the *Hatchets'* for the second time, even Captain Bernstein was impressed by the spectacle before him. Against a sky of scudding cloud and flying stars, the light-house rose like the scepter of the oldest Sea-god. The mighty granite shaft was gripped

at the base by black knuckles of rock in a welter of foam. A hundred feet above, the six-foot reflectors of solid crystal sheathed the summit with fire, and flashed as they revolved there like the facets of a single burning jewel.

"They could be smashed with a three-inch gun," thought Bernstein, "and they are very costly. Many thousand pounds of damage could thus be done, and perhaps many ships endangered." But he concluded, with some regret, that his other plans were more promising.

It was long past Peter's usual bedtime; but he was trimming his oil lamp, just now, in his tiny octagonal sitting-room, half-way up the tower. He had been busy all the evening, with the secret of his happiness, which was a very queer one indeed. He was trying to write a book, trying and failing. His papers were scattered all over the worn red cloth that tried—and failed—to cover his oak table, exactly as poor Peter's language was trying to clothe his thought. Indeed, there were many clues to his life and character in that room, which served many purposes. It had only one window, hardly larger than the ar-

row-defying slits of a Norman castle. It was his kitchen, and a cooking-stove was fitted compactly into a corner. It was his library; and, facing the window, there was a book-shelf, containing several tattered volumes by Mark Rutherford; a Bible; the "Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture," by Gladstone; the "First Principles" of Herbert Spencer; and the Essays of Emerson. There was also a small volume, bound in blue leather, called "The Wonders of the Deep." The leather binding was protected by a brown paper jacket, for it was a prize, awarded by the Westport Grammar School, in 1864, to Peter Ramsay, aged fourteen, for his excellence in orthography. This, of course, was the beginning of all his dreams; and it was still their sustainment, though the death of his father, who had been the captain of a small coasting steamer, had thrown Peter on the world before he was fifteen, and ended his hopes of the scholarship, which was to have carried him eventually to the heights.

The bound volumes were buttressed between piles of the *British Weekly*. The only picture on the wall was a framed oleograph of Gladstone, his chief hero, though Peter had

long ago renounced the theology of the Impregnable Rock. Whether the great statesman deserved this worship or not is a matter for historians. The business of this chronicle is to record the views of Peter, and these were quite clear.

He was restless to-night. It was his sixty-sixth birthday, and it reminded him that he was behindhand with his great work. Nobody else had reminded him of it, for he was quite alone in the world. He was beginning to wonder, almost for the first time, whether he was really destined to fail. He had begun to look his age at last; but he was a fine figure of a man still. His white hair and flowing white beard framed a face of the richest mahogany brown, in which the blood mantled like wine over the cheek-bones. His deep eyes, of the marine blue, that belongs only to the folk of the sea, were haunted sometimes by visionary fires, like those in the eyes of an imaginative child. He might have posed for the original fisherman of his first name. Of course, he was regarded as a little eccentric by the dwellers on the coast, whom he had often amazed by what they called his "innocence." The red nosed landlord of the *Blue*

Dolphin had often been heard, on Sundays, to say that we should all do well if we were as innocent as Peter. When he visited the little town of Westport (which was now a naval base), the urchins in the street sometimes expressed their view of the matter by waiting until he was safely out of hearing, and then crowing like cocks.

Nobody knew of Peter Ramsay's secret, or the urchins might not have waited at all, and even the kindest of his friends would have regarded him as daft. But the comedy was not without its tragic aspect. Peter Ramsay may have been cracked, but it was with the peculiar kind of crack that you get in the everlasting hills, a rift that shows the sky. With his imperfect equipment and hopeless lack of technique, he was trying to write down certain truths, for the lack of which the civilized world, at that moment, was in danger of destruction.

This does not mean that Peter was the sole possessor of those truths. He was only one among millions of simple and unsophisticated souls, all over the world, who possessed those truths dumbly, and knew, with complete certainty, that their intellectual leaders, for the

most part, lacked them, or had lost them in a multitude of details. These dumb millions were right about certain important matters; and their leaders, for all their dialectical cleverness, had lost sight of the truth which has always proceeded *ex ore infantium*. It was the tragedy of the twentieth century, and it had culminated in the tragedy of philosophical Germany. There were certain features of modern books, modern paintings, and modern music, that mopped and mowed like faces through the bars of a mad-house, clamoring for dishonor and brutality in every department of life. These things could not be dissociated from the international tragedy. They were its heralds. Peter Ramsay was one of those obscure millions who were the most important figures in Armageddon because they, and they alone, in our modern world, had retained the right to challenge the sophistries of Germany. They had not needed the war to teach them the reality of evil; and if they had sinned, they had never for a moment tried to prove that they did right in sinning.

Peter knew all this, though he would not have said it in so many words. In his book,

he was trying to meet the main onset of all those destructive forces. He had realized that the modern world had no faith, since the creeds had gone into the melting pot; and he was trying to write down, plainly, for plain men, exactly what he believed.

He turned over the red-lined pages of the big leather-bound ledger, half diary, half commonplace book, in which, for the last forty years, he had made his notes. It was a queer medley, beginning with passages written in his youth, that recalled many of his old struggles. There was one, in particular, that always reminded him of a school friend named Herbert Potts, who had eventually won the coveted scholarship. They used to go for walks together, over the hills, and talk about science and religion.

"So you don't believe there is any future life," Peter had said to him one day.

"Not for the individual," replied Herbert Potts, adjusting his glasses, with a singularly intellectual expression.

"But if there is none for the individual, it means the end of all we are fighting for, because the race will come to an end, eventually," said Peter. "Why, think, Potts, think,

it means that all your progress drops over a precipice at last. It means that instead of the Figure of Love, we must substitute the Figure of Death, stretching out his arms and saying to the whole human race, 'Come unto *Me!* Suffer little children to come unto *Me!*' "

"I am afraid all the evidence points that way," said Potts, and as he had just passed the London matriculation examination, the words rang like a death-knell in Peter's foolish heart. He remembered how the words had recurred to him in his dreams that night, and how he awoke in the gray dawn to find that his pillow was wet with tears.

There were many other memories in his book, memories of the long struggle, the wrestling with the angel, and at last the music of that loftier certainty which he longed to impart.

A little after midnight, he threw aside the hopeless chaos of the manuscript, into which he had been trying to distil the essence of his scrap-book. He rose and went upstairs to his bedroom on the next floor. It was a little smaller than his sitting-room, and contained a camp-bed, a wash-stand, with a