

ALDRICH THOMAS BAILEY

WYNDHAM TOWERS

Thomas Aldrich
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Thomas Bailey Aldrich

Wyndham Towers

TO EDWIN BOOTH. MY DEAR BOOTH:

In offering these verses to you, I beg you to treat them (as you have many a time advised a certain lord chamberlain to treat the players) not according to their desert. "Use them after your own honor and dignity; the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty."

These many years your friend and comrade,
T. B. ALDRICH.

NOTE

The motif of the story embodied in the following poem was crudely outlined in a brief sketch printed in an early collection of the authors verse, and subsequently cancelled for a purpose not until now accomplished. Wyndham Towers is not to be confused with this discarded sketch, the text of which has furnished only a phrase, or an indirect suggestion, here and there. That the writer's method, when recasting the poem, was more or less influenced by the poets he had been studying—chiefly the dramatists of the Elizabethan era—will, he hopes, be obvious. It was part of his design, however far he may have fallen from it, to give his narrative something of the atmosphere and color of the period in which the action takes place, though the story is supposed to be told at a later date.

WYNDHAM TOWERS

Before you reach the slender, high-arched bridge,
Like to a heron with one foot in stream,
The hamlet breaks upon you through green boughs—
A square stone church within a place of graves
Upon the slope; gray houses oddly grouped,
With plastered gables set with crossed oak-beams,
And roofs of yellow tile and purplish slate.
That is The Falcon, with the swinging sign
And rustic bench, an ancient hostelry;
Those leaden lattices were hung on hinge
In good Queen Bess's time, so old it is.
On ridge-piece, gable-end, or dove-cot vane,
A gilded weathercock at intervals
Glimmers—an angel on the wing, most like,
Of local workmanship; for since the reign
Of pious Edward here have carvers thrived,
In saints'-heads skillful and winged cherubim
Meet for rich abbeys. From yon crumbling tower,
Whose brickwork base the cunning Romans laid—
And now of no use else except to train
The ivy of an idle legend on—
You see, such lens is this thin Devon air,
If it so chance no fog comes rolling in,
The Torridge where its branching crystal spreads

To join the Taw. Hard by from a chalk cliff
A torrent leaps: not lovelier Sappho was
Giving herself all silvery to the sea
From that Leucadian rock. Beneath your feet
Lie sand and surf in curving parallels.
Off shore, a buoy gleams like a dolphin's back
Dripping with brine, and guards a sunken reef
Whose sharp incisors have gnawed many a keel;
There frets the sea and turns white at the lip,
And in ill-weather lets the ledge show fang.
A very pleasant nook in Devon, this,

Upon the height of old was Wyndham Towers,
Clinging to rock there, like an eagle's nest,
With moat and drawbridge once, and good for siege;
Four towers it had to front the diverse winds:
Built God knows when, all record being lost,
Locked in the memories of forgotten men.
In Caesar's day, a pagan temple; next
A monastery; then a feudal hold;
Later a manor, and at last a ruin.
Such knowledge have we of it, vaguely caught
Through whispers fallen from tradition's lip.
This shattered tower, with crenellated top
And loops for archers, alone marks the spot,
Looming forlornly—a gigantic harp
Whereon the invisible fingers of the wind
Its fitful and mysterious dirges play.

Here dwelt, in the last Tudor's virgin reign,
One Richard Wyndham, Knight and Gentleman,
(The son of Rawdon, slain near Calais wall
When Bloody Mary lost her grip on France,)
A lonely wight that no kith had nor kin
Save one, a brother—by ill-fortune's spite
A brother, since 't were better to have none—
Of late not often seen at Wyndham Towers,
Where he in sooth but lenten welcome got
When to that gate his errant footstep strayed.
Yet held he dear those gray majestic walls,
Time-stained and crusted with the sea's salt breath;
There first his eyes took color of the sea,
There did his heart stay when fate drove him thence,
And there at last—but that we tell anon.
Darrell they named him, for an ancestor
Whose bones were whitening in Holy Land,
The other Richard; a crusader name,
Yet it was Darrell had the lion-heart.
No love and little liking served this pair,
In look and word unpaired as white and black—
Of once rich bough the last unlucky fruit.
The one, for straightness like a Norland pine
Set on some precipice's perilous edge,
Intrepid, handsome, little past blown youth,
Of all pure thought and brave deed amorous,
Moulded the court's high atmosphere to breathe,
Yet liking well the camp's more liberal air—
Poet, soldier, courtier, 't was the mode;

The other—as a glow-worm to a star—
Suspicious, morbid, passionate, self-involved,
The soul half eaten out with solitude,
Corroded, like a sword-blade left in sheath
Asleep and lost to action—in a word,
A misanthrope, a miser, a soured man,
One fortune loved not and looked at askance.
Yet he a pleasant outward semblance had.
Say what you will, and paint things as you may,
The devil is not black, with horn and hoof,
As gossips picture him: he is a person
Quite scrupulous of doublet and demeanor,
As was this Master Wyndham of The Towers,
Now latterly in most unhappy case,
Because of matters to be here set forth.

A thing of not much moment, as life goes,
A thing a man with some philosophy
Had idly brushed aside, as 't were a gnat
That winged itself between him and the light,
Had, through the crooked working of his mind,
Brought Wyndham to a very grievous pass.
Yet 't was a grapestone choked Anacreon
And hushed his song. There is no little thing
In nature: in a raindrop's compass lie
A planet's elements. This Wyndham's woe
Was one Griselda, daughter to a man
Of Bideford, a shipman once, but since
Turned soldier; now in white-haired, wrinkled age

Sitting beneath the olive, valiant still,
With sword on nail above the chimney-shelf
In case the Queen should need its edge again.
An officer he was, though lowly born.
The man aforetime, in the Netherlands
And through those ever-famous French campaigns
(Marry, in what wars bore he not a hand?)
In Rawdon Wyndham's troop of horse had served,
And when he fell that day by Calais wall
Had from the Frenchmen's pikes his body snatched,
And so much saved of him, which was not much,
The good knight being dead. For this deed's sake,
That did enlarge itself in sorrow's eye,
The widow deemed all guerdon all too small,
And held her dear lord's servant and his girl,
Born later, when that clash of steel was done,
As her own kin, till she herself was laid
I' the earth and sainted elsewhere. The two sons
Let cool the friendship: one in foreign parts
Did gold and honor seek; at hall stayed one,
The heir, and now of old friends negligent:
Thus fortune hardens the ignoble heart.
Griselda even as a little maid,
Demure, but with more crotchets in the brain,
I warrant ye, than minutes to the hour,
Had this one much misliked; in her child-thought
Confused him somehow with those cruel shapes
Of iron men that up there at The Towers
Quickened her pulse. For he was gaunt, his face,

Mature beyond the logic of his years,
Had in it something sinister and grim,
Like to the visage pregnant fancy saw
Behind the bars of each disused casque
In that east chamber where the harness hung
And dinted shields of Wyndhams gone to grace—
At Poitiers this one, this at Agincourt,
That other on the sands of Palestine:
A breed of fierce man-slayers, sire and son.
Of these seemed Richard, with his steel cross-bow
Killing the doves in very wantonness—
The gentle doves that to the ramparts came
For scattered crumbs, undreamful of all ill.
Each well-sent dart that stained a snowy breast
Straight to her own white-budding bosom went.
Fled were those summers now, and she had passed
Out of the child-world of vain fantasy
Where many a rainbow castle lay in ruin;
But to her mind, like wine-stain to a flask,
The old distrust still clung, indelible,
Holding her in her maidhood's serious prime
Well pleased from his cold eyes to move apart,
And in her humble fortunes dwell secure.
Indeed, what was she?—a poor soldier's girl,
Merely a tenant's daughter. Times were changed,
And life's bright web had sadder colors in 't:
That most sweet gentle lady—rest her soul!—
Shrunk to an epitaph beside her lord's,
And six lines shorter, which was all a shame;

Gaunt Richard heir; that other at earth's end,
(The younger son that was her sweetheart once,)
Fighting the Spaniards, getting slain perchance;
And all dear old-time uses quite forgot.
Slowly, unnoted, like the creeping rust
That spreads insidious, had estrangement come,
Until at last, one knew not how it fell,
And little cared, if sober truth were said,
She and the father no more climbed the hill
To Twelfth Night festival or May-day dance,
Nor commerce had with any at The Towers.
Yet in a formless, misty sort of way
The girl had place in Wyndham's mind—the girl,
Why, yes, beshrew him! it was even she
Whom his soft mother had made favorite of,
And well-nigh spoiled, some dozen summers gone.

Perhaps because dull custom made her tame,
Or that she was not comely in the bud,
Her sweetness halting like a tardy May
That wraps itself in mist, and seems not fair,
For this or finer reason undivined,
His thought she touched not, and was glad withal
When she did note how others took his eye
And wore rue after. Thus was her white peace
Undarkened till, it so befell, these two
Meeting as they a hundred times had met
On hill-path or at crossing of the weir,
Her beauty broke on him like some rare flower

That was not yesterday. Ev'n so the Spring
Unclasps the girdle of its loveliness
Abruptly, in the North here: long the drifts
Linger in hollows, long on bough and briar
No slight leaf ventures, lest the frost's keen tooth
Nip it, and then all suddenly the earth
Is nought but scent and bloom. So unto him
Griselda's grace unclosed. Where lagged his wit
That guessed not of the bud that slept in stem,
Nor hint had of the flower within the bud?
If so much beauty had a tiger been,
'T had eaten him! In all the wave-washed length
Of rocky Devon where was found her like
For excellence of wedded red and white?
Here on that smooth and sunny field, her cheek,
The hostile hues of Lancaster and York
Did meet, and, blending, make a heavenly truce,
This were indeed a rose a king might wear
Upon his bosom. By St. Dunstan, now,
Himself would wear it. Then by seeming chance
Crossed he her walks, and stayed her with discourse
Devised adroitly; spoke of common things
At first—of days when his good mother lived,
If 't were to live, to pass long dolorous hours
Before his father's effigy in church;
Of one who then used often come to hall,
Ever at Yule-tide, when the great log flamed
In chimney-place, and laugh and jest went round,
And maidens strayed beneath the mistletoe,

Making believe not see it, so got kissed—
Of one that joined not in the morrice-dance,
But in her sea-green kirtle stood at gaze,
A timid little creature that was scared
By dead men's armor. Nought there suffered change,
Those empty shells of valor grew not old,
Though something rusty. Would they fright her now
Looked she upon them? Held she in her mind—
'T was Spring and loud the mavis piped outside—
The day the Turkish helmet slipped from peg,
And clashing on the floor, congealed her blood
And sent both hands to terror-smitten eyes,
She trembling, ready to yield up the ghost?
Right merry was it! Finally he touched
On matters nearer, things she had foreboded
And this one time must needs lend hearing to,
And end so sorry business ere woe came,
Like a true maid and honest, as she was.
So, tutoring the tremble on her lip
And holding back hot tears, she gave reply
With such discretion as straight tied his tongue,
Albeit he lacked not boldness in discourse:

“Indeed, indeed, sir, you speak but in jest!
Lightly, not meaning it, in courtier-way.
I have heard said that ladies at the Court—
I judge them not!—have most forgiving ears,
And list right willingly to idle words,
Listen and smile and never stain a cheek.

Yet not such words your father's son should use
With me, my father's daughter. You forget
What should most precious be to memory's heart,
Love that dared death; and so, farewell." Farewell
It was in sooth; for after that one time,
Though he had fain with passion-breathed vows
Besieged that marble citadel her breast,
He got no speech of her: she chose her walks;
Let only moon and star look on the face

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