

The BOWLING GREEN by Christopher Morley

Courting John Donne

I'VE just had an idea. I got up and moved my little Sangorsky and Sutcliffe copy of *Fatal Interview* to sandwich between the two Muses' Library volumes of John Donne; a split for the Dean's infinitive. That should please Mrs. Edna. Elinor Wylie's *Angels and Earthly Creatures* and Dorothy Parker's *After Such Pleasures* (both titles taken from J. D.) should stand there too, but for reasons of their own they have grown in where they stand.

I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner; but I rarely do.

It is on me to think some more about Donne. My starting point was good old parson Jessopp who with all his love for the great Dean was "not able to feel much enthusiasm for Donne as a poet." On that difficulty the magnificent Saintsbury said the final words in his introduction (1896, I think?) to E. K. Chambers's *Muses' Library* edition—

"It is almost necessary that those who do not like him should not like him at all; should be scarcely able to see how any decent and intelligent human creature can like him. It is almost as necessary that those who do like him . . . curb and restrain the expression of their love for fear that it should seem on that side idolatry." And then, after beginning in this judicial mood the grand old Stentor of modern criticism gets into good voice, forgets the anxious rector of Scarning, and cries of our unjessopped Jack such manly halloo as we desire. "Such a flower of incandescence . . . miraculous pregnancy of thought . . . the fantastic hippogriff of Donne's imagination . . . there is no poet and hardly any writer like Donne." My own favorite of Saintsbury's rumbling booms (of course, like everything of his they should be read amorously in full) is his description of the provinces of thought where Donne was master—

"Strange frontier regions, uttermost isles where sensuality, philosophy, and devotion meet, or where separately dwelling they rejoice or mourn over the conquests of each other."

Good, hey?

So I've been grieving to myself over the pleasure that Dr. Jessopp missed. (Not an innocent pleasure: the innocent of this world are as mercifully defended from Donne's delicate coarseness as from his extravagant penance.) Jessopp was rector of Scarning, and I looked up that parish in my precious *Crockford*. (Do you know *Crockford's Clerical Directory*? Something must be said about it one of these days. I always enjoy the vigorous heart of controversy shewn in its pref-

aces; and there is surely a subtle irony or pathos in the description—1933 edition—of the new cathedral at Liverpool. To give an idea of the majesty of the building, its dimensions are compared to those of H. M. S. *Queen Elizabeth*. I like that: the church should be the battleship of the Lord.—If you thought the Roman and English churches had ever forgiven each other, try a rousing *Crockford* preface: the editor, writing from "Amen House," even suggests that Leo XIII's Latin was bad.)

Well, I looked up Scarning in *Crockford*: the church (SS Peter and Paul) is in the diocese of Norwich, and the post-town is Dereham. Yes, Dereham, the town of Cowper and George Borrow: see how one thing leads to another. Unfortunately my old bicycling map of Norfolk doesn't show Scarning; it can't be very far from those drowsy villages Great Snoring and Little Snoring (whose post-town is Fakenham). According to *Crockford* the two Snorings get along with one parson, which seems reasonable. The vicar of Scarning (1933) was Rev. W. E. Perrin, and I'm greatly tempted to write and beg a photo of the rectory, where Dr. Jessopp studied Donne. Or surely there is some coronation client of the Green who will go us a pilgrimage to Scarning (and to Great Snoring) and report. The Snorings are near Walsingham, which is traditional for pilgrimage.—Still studying the map I see only a few miles away the village of Stiffkey: I vaguely remember there was some superb clerical scandal there a few years ago.

Has anyone ever written the book that cries out to be done on the Literary Associations of English Rectories? What a way to spend one's summers! What long gossiping (and jessopping) tea-parties in shaven gardens—trodded by "lissome clerical printless toe." What clink of silver spoons on china, what clambering up from low basket-chairs to meet the daughters of rural deans (with their massive ankles; too much bread sauce and Yorkshire pudding), what gout-fomenting sherry, what blue shadows under the copper beech. . .

But we must get back to John Donne.

I'm sorry that Dr. Jessopp didn't relish the poems (I presume it was the *Elegies* that frightened him most) but I can't

honestly feign surprise. As was more than once the case in queer old books, the very first publisher of the poems (John Marriott?) knew more about them than many subsequent highbrows.

The edition of 1633 included an admirable note *The Printer to the Understanders*, specifically distinguishing these from mere Readers. "This is not ordinary," says the

printer of his book, and he adds that if any man thinks he says so "for the vent of the impression" (viz. the sale of the edition) "I shall as willingly spare his money as his judgment."

Indeed no; the *Songs and Sonnets* (which include none of what we now describe as sonnets) are not ordinary; they are as scarce as the six- and four-petalled primroses that Donne was hunting at Montgomery Castle. "If these are straight, all other things are bevel." I can imagine Dr. Jessopp being put off, again and again, by finding the

poem about The Flea at the front of the book, as it appeared I think in all editions from 1635 to 1929; perhaps an error in printer's tact. Yet it would not have been unlike J. D. to set that oddity forward, to shock and startle. It is a plain intimation that the poet intends to talk about things exactly as he has experienced them, and not in any fashionable convention. Such advertisement is useful for Understanders. I remember how I was taken aback by the first page of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a good many years ago, where Joyce employs a universal childhood memory to surprise the reader to attention. And Donne's love poems are also the portrait of a young man. I wish I knew what it was that started Jessopp, when himself a youth at Cambridge, on the zeal for Donne. For unless you have entered into the full savor of his unchurched years how may you understand the equal passion with which the great Dean wooed God? His carnal poems were indeed "a bracelet of bright hair about the bone," a circumstantial wreath of loveliness on the physical relics of joy. And later he anatomized, made love to, the Dark Angel in the same fierce gusto. I like to remember that he became Dean of St. Paul's more by accident and favor than by any serious call. What he really hankered for

(Continued on page 16)



JOHN DONNE

Elizabethan Mystery Man

BY CHARLES WISNER BARRELL

The theory that the Earl of Oxford wrote the plays usually attributed to William Shakespeare has for some years had an increasing vogue. The Saturday Review believes that the movement has gained enough momentum to interest its subscribers, and publishes Mr. Barrell's summary of the theory for the literary record. It has asked Professor Elmer Edgar Stoll of the University of Minnesota to reply to Mr. Barrell's article in a discussion of the Oxford theory and similar hypotheses. Mr. Stoll's article will be published next week.—Editor.

AT Gateshead-on-Tyne, England, lives a retired schoolmaster who is looked upon by many keen students of Elizabethan literature as the greatest of literary detectives.

This modest, sixty-seven year old pedagogue bears the provocative name of J. Thomas Looney. He is the "onlie beggetter" of the theory that the plays and poems credited to "Mr. William Shakespeare" were really written by Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford.

Mr. Looney's discoveries, leading to this conclusion, were first published some seventeen years ago in a volume entitled "Shakespeare Identified." Smart Aleck detractors and reviewers who didn't bother to read his book, seized upon the Looney cognomen for purposes of ridicule. But the documentary facts and many hundreds of "co-incidences" connecting the mysterious Earl of Oxford with the plays and poems which the author of "Shakespeare Identified" presents in his dossier are not to be laughed off so easily.

The book fell into the hands of the late John Galsworthy who read it with avidity and declared it to be "the best detective story" of the times. Galsworthy bought dozens of copies and circulated them among his friends, many of whom were of that unorthodox breed who long since had ceased to believe wholeheartedly in the strange and contradictory legends that impute the "miracle of genius" to William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon. For the rustic William's biographers show him to have been first a

butcher's apprentice and later in life a maltster, money-lender, and land-speculator. There is no record of his having had any formal education whatever or any of the broadening influences of foreign travel. He left no books, letters, or manuscripts—not a scrap of paper to prove that he was personally able to construct one grammatical sentence. The entire extent of his manuscript bequest to humanity consists of six wretchedly scrawled signatures—spelled in four different ways.

Having taught classes in Shakespearean literature for years, Mr. Looney became less satisfied with the orthodox explanations given for the alleged genius of William of Stratford, the more he saturated himself in the beauty, wisdom, and amazing scholarship of the immortal works. Like Emerson, he could "not marry the man's vulgar and profane life to his verse." So, at the age of forty-eight, he set systematically to work to find a rational, common-sense explanation to the mystery which has puzzled so many thousands of casual readers before him.

Ultimately the trail led to the previously disregarded and half-obliterated footprints of Edward de Vere, Queen Elizabeth's wayward and unhappy Lord Great Chamberlain and one-time lover—a poet, Court dramatist, and patron of players of outstanding contemporary fame, but a man whose consuming passion for art and scholarship made him a prey to the designing machinations of politicians and courtiers, to escape whose blighting influences he turned to the companionship

of common poets, dramatists, musicians, and actors; one who fell afoul of the taboos of his own caste and "lost his good name" as a result; a nobleman, bearing the second oldest title in the realm, who "wasted his substance" and "squandered his patrimony on men of letters, whose bohemian mode of life seems to have attracted him."

Historians of the period have treated Edward de Vere with considerably less than justice, entirely aside from his connection with the Shakespearean authorship. He lives in their pages as a morose

and eccentric lordling who quarreled with the good Sir Philip Sidney on the tennis courts; a licentious wastrel who made his wife miserable and caused his father-in-law—the great Lord Burghley—much trouble and embarrassment from time to time. Froude passes him up curtly as "Burghley's ill-conditioned son-in-law." Sir Sidney Lee, who wrote the sketch of his life for the "Dictionary of National Biography," admits the many references to Vere's preoccupation with poetry, music, and the drama, but also belabors him unmercifully for his improvidence and the scandal of his private life. On the other hand, Dr. A. B. Grosart, one of the great pioneers in Elizabethan research, commented in 1872 on the force and beauty of Lord Oxford's early verse and lamented their seemingly unfulfilled promise in these words: "An unlifted shadow lies across his memory."

This shadow has now been lifted to disclose a personality that seems to anticipate on a grander and more tragic scale the strange career of Lord Byron.

The research of J. Thomas Looney, amplified and corroborated by Bernard M. Ward in the first adequate biography of Edward de Vere, based on previously uncollected records of his activities and family papers and correspondence, "The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford" (John Murray, 1928), directly connects this remarkable man with the literary renaissance that came to full flower in the last years of Elizabeth. The collated facts of his life, his letters, and writings match up with so many situations, plots, characterizations, technical tricks of composition, and, in fact, whole passages of poetry that reappear in the work published under the name of William Shakespeare that Oxford's identification with the plays and poems is unmistakable.

It may surprise many readers to learn that Lord Oxford is referred to by Elizabethan commentators on poetry and the drama as the outstanding practitioner of these arts. He was evidently a voluminous producer, yet only a few pages of his poetry survive under his own name and none of his dramatic writings whatever, either in manuscript or printed form. If published, they were published anonymously or under a nom-de-plume. References to his career in the creative arts begin in 1578, when he was twenty-eight years old.

At this time the Earl was given an honorary degree by Oxford University. Dr. Gabriel Harvey welcomed him in a Latin oration which yields the following significant statements in Ward's translation:

For a long time past Phoebus Apollo



EDWARD DE VERE IN 1575
From the painting at Welbeck Abbey,
owned by the Duke of Portland.