

Alfred Noyes (1880-1959)

1 *The Admiral's Ghost*

I tell you a tale to-night  
Which a seaman told to me,  
With eyes that gleamed in the lanthorn light  
And a voice as low as the sea.

You could almost hear the stars 5  
Twinkling up in the sky,  
And the old wind woke and moaned in the spars,  
And the same old waves went by,

Singing the same old song 10  
As ages and ages ago,  
While he froze my blood in that deep-sea night  
With the things that he seemed to know.

A bare foot pattered on deck;  
Ropes creaked; then — all grew still,  
And he pointed his finger straight in my face 15  
And growled, as a sea-dog will.

“Do ’ee know who Nelson was?  
That pore little shrivelled form  
With the patch on his eye and the pinned-up sleeve 20  
And a soul like a North Sea storm?

“Ask of the Devonshire men!  
They know, and they’ll tell you true;  
He wasn’t the pore little chawed-up chap  
That Hardy thought he knew.

“He wasn’t the man you think! 25  
His patch was a dern disguise!  
For he knew that they’d find him out, d’you see,  
If they looked him in both his eyes.

“He was twice as big as he seemed;  
But his clothes were cunningly made. 30  
He’d both of his hairy arms all right.  
The sleeve was a trick of the trade.

“You’ve heard of sperrits, no doubt;  
Well, there’s more in the matter than that!  
But he wasn’t the patch, and he *wasn’t* the sleeve, 35  
And he *wasn’t* the laced cocked-hat.

“*Nelson was just — a Ghost!*  
You may laugh! But the Devonshire men  
They knew that he’d come when England called,  
And they know that he’ll come again. 40

“I’ll tell you the way it was  
(For none of the landsmen know),  
And to tell it you right, you must go a-starn  
Two hundred years or so.

• • • • •  
“The waves were lapping and slapping 45  
The same as they are to-day;  
And Drake lay dying aboard his ship  
In Nombre Dios Bay.

“The scent of the foreign flowers  
Came floating all around; 50  
‘But I’d give my soul for the smell o’ the pitch,’  
Says he, ‘in Plymouth Sound.

“‘What shall I do,’ he says,  
‘When the guns begin to roar,  
An’ England wants me, and me not there 55  
To shatter her foes once more?’

“(You’ve heard what he said, maybe,  
But I’ll mark you the p’int’s again;  
For I want you to box your compass right  
And get my story plain.) 60

“‘You must take my drum,’ he says,

‘To the old sea-wall at home;  
And if ever you strike that drum,’ he says,  
‘Why, strike me blind, I’ll come!’

“If England needs me, dead 65  
Or living, I’ll rise that day!  
I’ll rise from the darkness under the sea  
Ten thousand miles away.’

“That’s what he said; and he died;  
An’ his pirates, listenin’ roun’, 70  
With their crimson doublets and jewelled swords  
That flashed as the sun went down,

“They sewed him up in his shroud  
With a round-shot top and toe,  
To sink him under the salt sharp sea 75  
Where all good seamen go.

“They lowered him down in the deep,  
And there in the sunset light  
They boomed a broadside over his grave,  
As meanin’ to say ‘Good-night.’ 80

“They sailed away in the dark  
To the dear little isle they knew;  
And they hung his drum by the old sea-wall  
The same as he told them to.

. . . . .

“Two hundred years went by, 85  
And the guns began to roar,  
And England was fighting hard for her life,  
As ever she fought of yore.

“‘It’s only my dead that count,’  
She said, as she says to-day; 90  
‘It isn’t the ships and it isn’t the guns  
’Ull sweep Trafalgar’s Bay.’

“D’you guess who Nelson was?  
You may laugh, but it’s true as true!

There was more in that pore little chawed-up chap                    95  
    Than ever his best friend knew.

“The foe was creepin’ close,  
    In the dark, to our white-cliffed isle;  
They were ready to leap at England’s throat  
    When — oh, you may smile, you may smile;                    100

“But — ask of the Devonshire men;  
    For they heard in the dead of night  
The roll of a drum, and they saw *him* pass  
    On a ship all shining white.

“He stretched out his dead cold face                                    105  
    And he sailed in the grand old way!  
The fishes had taken an eye and an arm,  
    But he *swept* Trafalgar’s Bay.”

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