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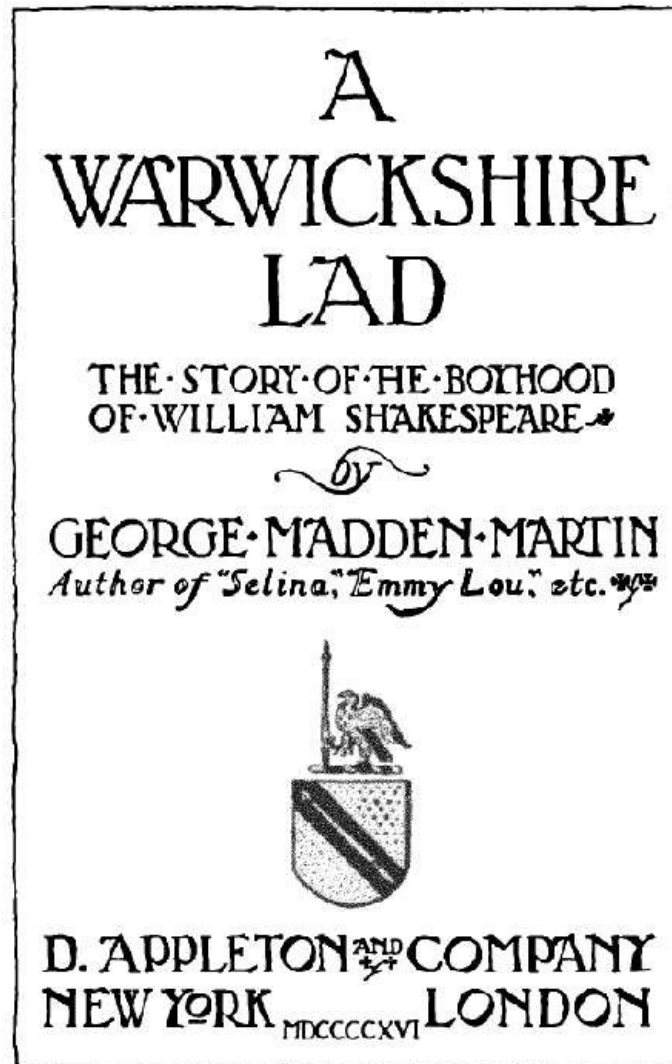
*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A WARWICKSHIRE LAD: THE STORY OF THE BOYHOOD OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE ***

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A WARWICKSHIRE LAD

[2]





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"Dad ... sat staring in moody silence"

"Tall, sturdy Will Shakespeare could buy up cattle ... as well as the butcher's son"

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A WARWICKSHIRE LAD

I

[9]

Little Will Shakespeare was going homeward through the dusk from Gammer Gurton's fireside. He had no timorous fears, not he. He would walk proudly and deliberately as becomes a man. Men are not afraid. Yet Gammer had told of strange happenings at her home. A magpie had flown screaming over the roof, the butter would not come in the churn, an' a strange cat had slipped out afore the maid at daybreak—a cat without a tail, Gammer said—

Little Will quickened his pace.

Dusk falls early these December days, and Willy Shakespeare scurrying along the street is only five, and although men are not afraid yet— [10]

So presently when he pulls up he is panting, and he beats against the stubborn street door with little red fists, and falls in at its sudden opening, breathless.

But Mother's finger is on her lips as she looks up from her low chair in the living-room, for the whole world in this Henley Street household stands still and holds its breath when Baby Brother sleeps. Brought up short, Will tiptoes over to the chimney corner. Why will toes stump when one most wants to move noiselessly? He is panting still too with his hurrying and with all he has to tell. [11]

"She says," begins Will before he has even reached Mother's side and his whisper is awesome, "Gammer says that Margery is more than any ailin', she is."

Now chimney corners may be wide and generous and cheerful with their blazing log, but they open into rooms which as night comes on grow big and shadowy, with flickers up against the raftered darkness of the ceilings. Little Will Shakespeare presses closer to his mother's side. "She says, Gammer does, she says that Margery is witched."

Now Margery was the serving-maid at the house of Gammer Gurton's son-in-law, Goodman Sadler, with whom Gammer lived. [12]

Mother at this speaks sharply. She is outdone about it. "A pretty tale for a child to be hearing," she says. "It is but a fearbabe. I wonder at Gammer, I do."

And turning aside from the cradle which she has been rocking, she lifts small Will to her lap, and he stretching frosty fingers and toes all tingling to the heat, snuggles close. He is glad Mother speaks sharply and is outdone about it; somehow this makes it more reassuring.

"Witched!" says Mother. "Tell me! 'Tis lingering in the lane after dark with that gawky country sweetheart has given her the fever that her betters have been having since the Avon come over bank. A wet autumn is more to be feared than Gammer's witches. Poor luck it is the lubberfolk aren't after the girl in truth; a slattern maid she is, her hearth unswept and house-door always open and the cream ever a-chill. The brownie-folk, I promise you, Will, pinch black and blue for less." [13]

Mother is laughing at him. Little Will recognizes that and smiles back, but half-heartedly, for he is not through confessing.

"I don't like to wear it down my back," says he. "It tickles."

"Wear what?" asks Mother, but even as she speaks must partly divine, for a finger and thumb go searching down between his little nape and the collar of his doublet, and in a moment they draw it forth, a bit of witches' elm. [14]

"Gammer, she sewed it there," says Will.

A little frown was gathering between Mother's brows, which was making small Willy Shakespeare feel still more reassured and comfortable, when suddenly she gave a cry and start, half rising, so that he, startled too, slid perforce to the floor, clinging to her gown.

Whereupon Mother sank back in her chair, her hand pressed against the kerchief crossed over her bosom, and laughed shamefacedly, for it had been nothing more terrible that had startled her than big, purring Graymalkin, the cat, insinuating his sleek back under her hand as he arched and rubbed about her chair. And so, sitting down shamefacedly, she gathered Will up again and called him goose and little chuck, as if he and not she had been the one to jump and cry out. [15]

But he laughed boisterously. The joke was on Mother, and so he laughed loud, as becomes a man when the joke is on the women folk.

"Ho!" said Will Shakespeare.

"Sh-h-h!" said Mother.

But the mischief was done and Will must get out of her lap, for little Brother Gilbert, awakened, was whimpering in the cradle. [16]

Will clambered up on the settle to think it all over. Mother had started and cried out. So after all was Mother afraid too? Of—of things? Had she said it all to reassure him? The magpie had flown screaming over the house for he had seen it. So what if the rest were true—that the cat, the cat without the tail stealing out at daybreak, had been—what Gammer said—a witch, weaving overnight her spell about poor Margery? He knew how it would have been; he had heard whispers about these things before; the dying embers on the hearth, the little waxen figure laid to melt thereon, the witch-woman weaving the charm about—now swifter, faster circling—with passes of hands above. [19]



"Will clambered up on the settle to think it all over"

Little Will Shakespeare, terrified at his own imaginings, clutched himself, afraid to move. Is that only a shadow yonder in the corner, now creeping toward him, now stealing away?

What is that at the pane? Is it the frozen twigs of the old pippin, or the tapping fingers of some night creature without?

Will Shakespeare falls off the settle in his haste and scuttles to Mother. Once there, he hopes she does not guess why he hangs to her so closely. But he is glad, nevertheless, when the candles are brought in.

II

[20]

But these things all vanish from mind when the outer door opens and Dad comes in stamping and blowing. Dad is late, but men are always late. It is expected that they should come in late and laugh at the women who chide and remind them that candles cost and that it makes the maid testy to be kept waiting.

Men should laugh loud like Dad, and catch Mother under the chin and kiss her once, twice, three times. Will means to be just such a man when he grows up, and to fill the room with his big shoulders and bigger laugh as Dad is doing now while tossing Brother Gilbert. He, little Will, he will never be one like Goodman Sadler, Gammer's son-in-law, with a lean, long nose, and a body slipping flatlike through a crack of the door. [21]

And here Dad bends to tweak the ear of Will who would laugh noisily if it hurt twice as badly. It makes him feel himself a man to wink back those tears of pain.



"Dad bends to tweak the ear of Will"

"A busy afternoon this, Mary," says Dad. "Old Timothy Quinn from out Welcombe way was in haggling over a dozen hides to sell. Then Burbage was over from Coventry about that matter of the players, and kept me so that I had to send Bardolph out with your Cousin Lambert to Wilmcote to mark that timber for felling." [22]

Now for all Master Shakespeare's big, off-hand mentioning thus of facts, this was meant for a confession.

Mary Shakespeare had risen to take the crowing Gilbert, handed back to her by her husband, and with the other hand was encircling Will, holding to her skirt. She was tall, with both grace and state, and there was a chestnut warmth in the hair about her clear, white brow and nape, and in the brown of her serene and tender eyes. These eyes smiled at John Shakespeare with a hint of upbraiding, and she shook her head at him with playful reproach. [25]

Little Will saw her do it. He knew too how to interpret such a look. Had Father been naughty?

"You are not selling more of the timber, John?" asked Mother.

"Say the word, Mistress Mary Arden of the Asbies," says Father grandly, "and I stop the bargain with your Cousin Lambert where it stands. 'Tis yours to say about your own. Though nothing spend, how shall a man live up to his state? But it shall be as you say, although 'tis for you and the boy. He is the chief bailiff's son—his Dad can feel he has given him that, but would have him more. I have never forgot your people felt their Mary stepped down to wed a Shakespeare. I have applied to the Herald's College for a grant of arms. The Shakespeares are as good as any who fought to place the crown on Henry VII's head. But it shall be stopped. The land and the timber on it is Mistress Mary Shakespeare's, not mine." [26]

But Mary, pushing little Will aside clung to her husband's arm, and the warmth in her tender eyes deepened to something akin to yearning as they looked up at him. With the man of her choice, and her children—with these Mary Shakespeare's life and heart were full. There was no room for ambition for she was content. Had life been any sweeter to her as Mary Arden of the Asbies, daughter of a gentleman, than as Mary Shakespeare, wife of a dealer in leathers? Nay, nor as sweet! [27]

But she could not make her husband see it so. Yet—and she looked up at him with a sudden

passion of love in that gaze—it was this big, sanguine, restless, masterful spirit in him that had won her. From the narrow, restricted conditions of a provincial gentlewoman's life, she had looked out into a bigger world for living, through the eyes of this masterful yeoman, his heart big with desire to conquer and ambition to achieve. Was her faith in his capacity to know and seize the essential in his venturing, less now than then? Never, never—not that, not that!

[28]

"Do as you will about it, John," begs Mary, her cheek against his arm, "only—is it kind to say the land is mine? We talked that all out once, goodman mine. Only this one thing more, John, for I would not seem ever to carp and faultfind—you know that, don't you?—but that Bardolph—"

"He's a low tavern fellow, I allow, Mary—of course, of course. I know all you would say—his nose afire and his ruffian black poll ever being broken in some brawl, but he's a good enough fellow behind it, and useful to me. You needs must keep on terms with high and low, Mary, to hold the good will of all. That's why I am anxious to arrange this matter with Burbage to have the players here, if the Guild will consent—"

[29]

"Players?" says Will, listening at his father's side. "What are players?"

"Tut," says Dad, "not know the players! They are actors, Will—players. Hear the boy—not know the players!"

But Mother strokes his hair. "When I told you a tale, sweet, this very morn, you went to playing it after. I was the Queen-mother, you said, outside the prison walls, and you and Brother were the little Princes in the cruel tower, and thus you played. You stood at the casement, two gentle babes, cradling each other in your arms, and called to me below. So with the players, child, they play the story out instead of telling it. But now, these my babes to bed."

[30]

III

[31]

The next day things seem different. One no longer feels afraid, while the memory of Gammer's tales is alluring. Will remembers, too, that greens from the forest were ordered sent to the Sadlers for the making of garlands for the Town Hall revels. Small Willy Shakespeare slipped off from home that afternoon.

Reaching the Sadlers, he stopped on the threshold abashed. The living-room was filled with neighbors come to help—young men, girls, with here and there some older folk—all gathered about a pile of greens in the center of the floor, from which each was choosing his bit, while garlands and wreaths half done lay about in the rushes.

[32]

But, though his baby soul dreams it not, there is ever a place and welcome for a chief bailiff's little son. They turn at his entrance, and Mistress Sadler bids him come in; her cousin at her elbow praises his eyes—shade of hazel nut, she calls them. And Gammer, peering to find the cause of interruption and spying him, pushes a stool out from under her feet and curving a yellow, shaking finger, beckons and points him to it. But while doing so, she does not stay her quavering and garrulous recital. He has come, then, in time to hear the tale?

[33]

"An' the man, by name of Gosling," Gammer is saying, "dwelt by a churchyard—"

Will Shakespeare slips to his place on the stool.

Hamnet is next to him, Hamnet Sadler who is eight, almost a man grown. Hamnet's cheeks are red and hard and shining, and he stands square and looks you in the face. Hamnet has a fist, too, and has thrashed the butcher's son down by the Rother Market, though the butcher's son is nine.

Here Hamnet nudges Will. What is this he is saying? About Gammer, his very own grandame?

"Ben't no witches," mutters Hamnet to Will. "Schoolmaster says so. Says the like of Gammer's talk is naught but women's tales."

[34]

Whereupon Gammer pauses and turns her puckered eyes down upon the two urchins at her knee. Has she heard what her grandson said? Will Shakespeare feels as guilty as if he had been the one to say it.

"Ay, but those are brave words, Hammie," says Gammer, and she wags her sharp chin knowingly; "brave words. An' you shall take the bowl yonder and fetch a round o' pippins from the cellar for us here. Candle? La, you know the way full well. The dusk is hardly fell. Nay, you're not plucking Judith's sleeve, Hammie? You are not a lad to want a sister at elbow? Go, now! What say you, Mistress Snelling? The tale? An' Willy Shakespeare here, all eyes and open mouth for it, too? Ay, but he's the rascalliest sweet younker for the tale. An' where were we? Ay, the fat woman of Brentford had just come to Goodman Gosling's house—"

[37]



"Ay, but those are brave words, Hammie," says Gammer"

"Come back an' shut the door behind you, Hammie; there's more than a nip to these December gales. I' faith, how the lad drumbles, a clumsy lob—"

"As you say, the fat woman of Brentford, one Gossip Pratt by name, an' a two yards round by common say she was, an' that beard showing on her chin under her thrummed hat an' muffler, a man with score o' years to beard need not be ashamed of—this same woman comes to Goodman Gosling's, him as dwelt by the churchyard. But he, avised about her dealings, sent her speedily away, most like not choosing his words, him being of a jandered, queazy stomach, an' something given to tongue. For an hour following her going, an' you'll believe me—an' I had it from his wife's cousin a-come ten year this simple time when I visited my sister's daughter Nan at Brentford—his hogs fell sick an' died to the number o' twenty an' he helpless afore their bloating and swelling. [38]

"Nor did it end there, for his children falling ill soon after—a pretty dears they were, I mind them, a-hanging of their heads to see a stranger, an' a finger in mouth—they falling sick, the woman of Brentford come again, an' this time all afraid to say her nay. An' layin' off her cloak, she took the youngest from the mother's breast, dandling an' chucking it like an honest woman, whereupon it fell a-sudden in a swoon. [39]

"An' Goodwife Gosling seizing it, an' mindful of her being a witch-woman, calling on the name of God, straightway there fell out of the child's blanket a great toad which exploded in the fire like any gunpowder, an' the room that full o' smoke an' brimstone as none could—Save us! What's that!" cried Gammer. [40]



"Save us! What's that!" cried Gammer"

What, indeed! That cry—this rush along the passageway! Will Shakespeare, with heart a-still, clutches at Gammer's gown as there follows a crash against the oaken panels.

But as the door bursts open, it is Hamnet, head-first, sprawling into the room, the pippins preceding him over the floor.

"It were ahind me, breathin' hoarse, on the cellar stairs," whimpers Hamnet, gathering himself to his knees, his fist burrowing into his eyes.

Nor does he know why at this moment the laughter rises loud. For Hamnet cannot see what the others can—the white nose of Clowder, the asthmatic old house-dog, coming inquiringly over his shoulder, her tail wagging inquiry as to the wherefore of the uproar. [41]

But somehow, little Will Shakespeare did not laugh. Instead his cheeks and his ears burned hot for Hamnet. Judith did not laugh either. Judith was ten, and Hamnet's sister, and her black eyes flashed around on them all for laughing, and her cheeks were hot. Judith flung a look at Gammer, too, her own Gammer. And Will's heart warmed to Judith, and he went too when she sprang to help Hamnet.

Hamnet's face was scarlet yet as he fumbled around among the rushes and the greens for the pippins, and this done he retired hastily to his stool. But three-legged stools are uncertain, and he sat him heavily down on the rushes instead. [42]

Whereupon they laughed the louder, the girls and the women too—laughed until the candle flames flickered and flared, and Gammer, choking over her bowl, for cates and cider were being handed round, spilled the drink all down her withered neck and over her gown, wheezing and gasping until her daughter snatched the bowl from her and shook the breath back into her with no gentle hand.

IV

[43]

Meanwhile Will plucked Hamnet now blubbering on his stool, by the doublet. But Hamnet, turned sullen, shook him off. Perhaps he did not know that Will and Judith had not laughed. But since Hamnet saw fit to shake him off, Will was glad that just then, with a rush of cold air and a sprinkling of snow upon his short coat, Dad came in. His face was ruddy, and as he glanced laughingly around upon them all, he drew deep breath of the spicy evergreens, so that he filled his doublet and close-throated jerkin to their full. [44]

"Good-even to you, neighbors," says Dad. "An' is it great wonder the boy will run away to hie him here? The rogue kens a good thing equal to his elders. But come, boy; your mother is even now sure you have wandered to the river."

And Dad, with a mighty swing, shoulders Will, steadying him with a palm under both small feet; then pauses at Mistress Snelling's questioning.

"Is it true," she inquires, "that the players are coming?"

Sandy-hued Mistress Sadler stiffens and bridles at the question. The Sadlers, whisper says, are Puritanical, whereas there are those who hold that John Shakespeare and his household, for all they are observant of church matters, have still a Catholic leaning. Fond of genial John [47]

Shakespeare as the Sadler household are, they shake their heads over some things, and the players are one of these.

"Is it true they are coming?" repeats Mistress Snelling.

"Ay," says Dad, "an' John Shakespeare the man to be thanked for it. Come Twelfth Day sennight, at the Guild Hall, Mistress Snelling."

"Am I to see them, Dad?" whispers small Will, his head down and an arm tight about his father's neck as they go out the door.

"Ay, you inch," promises Dad, stooping, too, as they go under the lintel beneath the penthouse roof, out into the frosty night. The stars are beginning to twinkle through the dusk, and the frozen path crunches underfoot. On each side, as they go up the street, the yards about the houses stand bare and gaunt with leafless stalks. [48]

"Yes," says Dad. "Ay, boy, you shall see the players from between Dad's knees."



"Ay, boy, you shall see the players"

And like the old familiar stories we put on the shelf, gloating the while over the unproven treasures between the lids of the new, straightway Gammer's tales are forgot. And above the wind, as it whips scurries of snow around the corners, pipes Will's voice as they trudge home. But his pipings, his catechisings, now are concerned with this unknown world summed up in the magic term, "The Players." [49]

V

And Dad was as good as his word. First came Christmastide, with all Master Shakespeare's fellow burgesses to dine and the house agog with preparation. No wonder John Shakespeare had need of money to live up to his estate, for next came the Twelfth Night revels with the mummers and waits to be fed and boxed at the chief bailiff's door. And Mary Shakespeare said never a word, but did her husband's bidding cheerfully, even gayly. She had set herself to go his way with faith in his power to wrest success out of venture, and she was not one to take back her word. [50]

The week following, John Shakespeare carried his little son to see the players. [51]

"And was it not as I said?" Mother asked, when the two returned. "Did not the child fall asleep in the midst of it?"

"Sleep!" laughed Dad, clapping Will, so fine in a little green velvet coat, upon the shoulder. "He sleep! You do not know the boy. His cheeks were like your best winter apples, an' his eyes, bless the rogue, are shining yet. An' trotting homeward at my heels, he has scarce had breath to run for talking of it. 'Tis in the blood, boy; your father before you loves a good play, an' the players, too." [52]

And Will, blowing upon his nails aching with the cold, stands squarely with his small legs apart, and looks up at Father. "An' I shall be a player, too, when I'm a man," says Willy Shakespeare. "I shall be a player and wear a dagger like Herod, an' walk about an' draw it—so—" and struts him up and down while his father laughs and claps hand to knee and roars again, until Mistress Shakespeare tells him he it is who spoils the child.



"An' I shall be a player, too' ... says Willy Shakespeare"

But for Will Shakespeare the curtain had risen on a new world, a world of giant, of hero, of story, a world of glitter, of pageant, of scarlet and purple and gold. And now henceforth the flagstoned floor about the chimney was a stage upon which Mother and Brother and Kitty, the maid, at little Will's bidding, with Will himself, played a part; a stage where Virtue, in other words Will with the parcel-gilt goblet upside down upon his head for crown, ever triumphed over Vice, in the person of dull Kitty, with her knitting on the stool; or where, according to the play, in turn, Noah or Abraham or Jesus Christ walked in Heaven, while Herod or Pilate, Cain or Judas, burned in yawning Hell. [55]

VI

But as spring came, the garden offered a broader stage for life. The Shakespeare house was in Henley Street, and a fine house it was—too fine, some held, for a man in John Shakespeare's circumstances—two-storied, of timber and plaster, with dormer-windows and a penthouse over its door. And like its neighbors, the house stood with a yard at the side, and behind, a garden of flowers and fruit and herbs. And here the boy played the warm days through, his mother stepping now and then to the lattice window to see what he was about. And, gazing, often she saw him through tears, because of a yearning love over him, the more because of the two children dead before his coming. [59]



"His mother stepping now and then to the lattice window ..."

And Will, seeing her there, would tear into the house and drag her by the hand forth into the sweet, rain-washed air.

"An' see, Mother," he would tell her, as he haled her on to the sward beyond the arbor, "here it is, the story you told us yester-e'en. Here is the ring where they danced last night, the little folk, an' here is the glow-worm caught in the spider's web to give them light."

But something had changed Mary Shakespeare's mood. John Shakespeare, chief bailiff and burgess of Stratford, was being sued for an old debt, and one which Mary Shakespeare had been allowed to think was paid. Thereupon came to light other outstanding debts of which she had not known which must be met. John Shakespeare, with irons in so many fires, seemed forever to have put money out, in ventures in leather, in wool, in corn, in timber, and to have drawn none in. And now he talked of a mortgage on the Asbies estate. [60]

"Never," Mary told herself, with a look at little Will, at toddling Gilbert at her feet, with a thought for the unborn child soon to add another inmate to the household—"not with my consent. When the time comes they are grown, what will be left for them?" [61]

She was bitter about the secrecy of those debts incurred unknown to her. And yet to set herself against John!

Wandering with the children down the garden-path, idly she plucked a red rose and laid its cheek against a white one already in her hand. A kingdom divided against itself.

She sighed, then became conscious of the boy pulling at her sleeve.

"Tell us a story, Mother," he was begging, "a story with fighting an' a sword."

"A story, Will, with fighting and a sword?" Never yet could she say the child nay. She held her roses from her and pondered while she gazed. And her heart was bitter. [62]

"There was an Arden, child, whose blood is in your veins, who fought and fell at Barnet, crying shrill and fierce, 'Edward my King, St. George and victory!' And the young Edward, near him as he fell, called to a knight to lay hand to his heart, for Edward knew and loved him well, and had received of him money for a long-forgotten debt which young Edward's father would not press. So Edward called to a knight to lay hand upon his heart. But he was dead. 'A soldier and a knight,' said he who was afterward the King, 'and more—an honest man.'" [63]

Then she pushed the boy aside and going swiftly to the house ran to her room; and face laid in her hands she wept. What had she said in the bitterness of her feeling? What—even to herself—had she said?

Yet money must be had, she admitted that. But to encumber the estate!

She shrank from her own people knowing; she had inherited more of her father's estate than her sisters, and there had been feeling, and her brothers-in-law, Lambert and Webb, would be but upheld in their prophecies about her husband's capacity to care for her property. She would not have them know. "Talk it over first with your father, John," she told her husband, "or with your brother Henry. Let us not rush blindly into this thing. You had promised anyhow, you remember, to take Will out to the sheep-shearing." [64]

VII

[65]

So the next morning John Shakespeare swung Will up on the horse before him, and the two rode away through the chill mistiness of the dawn, Will kissing his hand back to Mother in the doorway. Bound for Grandfather's at Snitterfield they were. So out through the town, past the scattering homesteads with their gardens and orchards, traveled Robin, the stout gray cob, small Will's chattering voice as high-piped as the bird-calls through the dawn; on into the open country of meadows and cultivated fields, the mists lifting rosy before the coming sun, through lanes with mossy banks, cobwebs spun between the blooming hedgerows heavy with dew, over the hills, past the straggling ash and hawthorn of the dingles. And everywhere the cold, moist scent of dawn, and peep and call of nest-birds. [66]



"Bound for Grandfather's at Snitterfield they were"

And so early has been their start and so good stout Robin's pace, that reaching the Snitterfield farm, they find everything in the hurly-burly of preparation for sheep-shearing. So, after a hearty kissing by the womenfolk, aunts and cousins, Will, with a cake hot from the baking thrust into his hand, goes out to the steading to look around. At Snitterfield there are poultry, and calves, too, in the byre, and little pigs in the pen back of the barn. Then comes breakfast in the kitchen with the farm-hands with their clattering hobnailed shoes and tarry hands, after which follows the business of sheep-washing, which Will views from the shady bank of the pool, and in his small [69]

heart he is quite torn because of the plaintive bleatings of the frightened sheep. But he swallows it as a man should. There is a pedler haunting the sheep-shearing festivals of the neighborhood. The women have sent for him to bring his pack to Snitterfield, and Dad bids Will choose a pair of scented gloves for Mother—and be quick; they must be off for Stratford before the noon.

Dad seems short and curt. Grandfather, his broad, florid face upturned to Dad astride Robin, shakes his hoary head. "Doan' you do it, son John," says Grandfather; "'tis a-building on sand is any man who thinks to prosper on a mortgage. Henry and I'll advance you a bit. After which, cut down your living in Henley Street, son John, an' draw in the purse-strings." [70]

VIII

[71]

But baby years pass. When Will Shakespeare is six, he hears that he is to go to school. But not to nod over a hornbook at the petty school—not John Shakespeare's son! Little Will Shakespeare is entered at King's New College, which is a grammar-school.

But, dear me! Dear me! It was a dreary place and irksome. At first small Will sat among his kind awed. When Schoolmaster breathed Will breathed, but when Schoolmaster glanced frowningly up from under overhanging brows like penthouse roofs, then the heart of Will Shakespeare quaked within him. [72]

But that was while he was six. At seven, when the elements of Latin grammar confronted him, Will had already found grammar-school an excellent place to plead aching tooth or heavy head to stay away from. At eight, a dreary traveling for him to cover did his "*Sententiae Pueriles*" prove, and idle paths more pleasing.

At nine, he had learned to know many things not listed at grammar-school. For instance, he knew one Bardolph of the brazen, fiery nose, the tapster at the tavern. It was Bardolph who drew him out from under the knee and belaboring fists of one Thomas Chettle, another grammar-school boy, who had him down, behind High Cross in the Rother Market. [75]



"For instance, he knew one Bardolph ... the tapster at the tavern"

"In the devil's name," said Bardolph, setting him on his feet, "with your nose all gore an' never an eye you can open—what do you mean, boy, to be letting the like of *that* come over you?" "That"

meant Thomas Chettle, his fists squared, and as red as any fighting turkey, held off at arm's-length by Bardolph.

"Come over me!" cries Will, with a rush at Thomas, head down, for all his being held off by Bardolph's other hand. "Who says he has come over me?"

Now the matter stood thus. The day before, Will Shakespeare had followed a company of strolling mountebanks about town instead of going to school. And Thomas Chettle had told Schoolmaster, and he had told Father. When Will reached home the evening before, Dad was telling as much to Mother and blaming her for it. "An' Chettle's lad admits Will had ever rather see the swords an' hear a drum than look upon his lessons——"

This Father was saying as Will sidled in. Will heard him say it. And so Thomas Chettle had to answer for it.

"Come over me!" says Will to Bardolph who is holding him off and contemplating him, a battered wreck. "Come over me!" spitting blood and drawing a sleeve across his gory countenance, "I'd like to see him do it!" Will Shakespeare was not one to know when he was beaten.

IX

A year or two more, and school grew more irksome. Father fumed, and Mother sighed and drew Will against her knee whereon lay new little Sister Ann while little Sister Joan toddled about the floor. "Canst not seem to care for your books at all, son?" Mother asked, brushing Will's red brown hair out of his eyes. "Canst not see how it frets Father, who would have his oldest son a scholar and a gentleman?"

He meant to try. But hadn't Dad himself let him off one day to tramp at heels after him and Uncle Henry in Arden Forest? Will Shakespeare at eleven is a sorry student.

There comes a day when he is a big boy near thirteen years old. It is a time when the soft, hot winds of spring and the scent and the pulse of growing things get in the blood, and set one sick panting for the woods and the feel of the lush green underfoot and the sound of running water. Not that Will Shakespeare can put it into words—he only knows that when the smell of the warm, newly turned earth comes in at the schoolroom window and the hum of a wandering bee rises above the droning of the lesson, he lolls on the hacked and ink-stained desk and gazes out at the white clouds flecking the blue, and all the truant blood in his sturdy frame pulls against his promises.

Then at length comes a day when the madness is strong upon him and he hides his books, his Cato's *Maxims*, or perchance his *Confabulationes Pueriles*, under the garden hedge, and skirting the town, makes his way along the river. And there, hidden among the willows and green alders and rustling sedge, he spends the morning; and when in the heat of the day the fish refuse to nibble, he takes his hunk of bread out of his pocket and lies on his back among the rushes, while lazy dreams flit across his consciousness as the light summer clouds rock mistily across the blue.



"Hidden among the willows ... he spends the morning"

And, the wandering madness still upon him, in the afternoon he skirts about and tramps toward Shottery. It is no new thing to go to Shottery with or without Mother for a day at the Hathaways'. There always has been rebellion in the blood of Will Shakespeare, and there is a slender, wayward, grown-up somebody at Shottery who understands. Ann Hathaway has stayed often in Stratford with the Shakespeare household. Mother loves Ann; Father teases and twits her; the young men, swains and would-be sweethearts, swarm about her like bumblebees about the honeysuckle at the garden gate. [84]

And when she is there, Will himself seldom leaves her side. He has oft been a rebellious boy, whereat Mother has sighed and Father has sworn; but Ann, staying with them, and she alone, has laughed. She has understood.

And there have been times when this tall brown-haired young person has seized his hand, as if she too had moments of rebellion, and the two have run away—away from the swains and the would-be sweethearts, the Latin grammar and the scoldings, to wander about the river banks and the lanes.



"The two have run away ... to wander about the river banks."

X

[85]

So this afternoon Will tramped off to Shottery. There was a consciousness in the back of his mind of wonderful leafiness and embowering, of vines and riotous bloom about Ann's home. He opened the wicket and trudged up the path, and peered in at the open door. Ann, within the doorway, saw him. She looked him in the eye, then up at the sun yet high in the sky, and laughed. And he knew she understood it—truanacy.



"He ... trudged up the path and peered in at the open door"

Perhaps she understood more than the fact, perhaps she understood the feeling. She threw her work aside, needle stuck therein, and clapped a wide straw hat upon her head and taking his hand dragged him down the path and out the gate and away—along the Evesham road. [86]

But she lectured him nevertheless, this red-cheeked boy with the full as yet undisciplined young mouth and the clear, warm hazel eyes.

"You tell me that I, too, throw my work down and run away? Ay, Will, there's that hot blood within me that sweeps me out every now and then from within tame walls and from stupid people, and makes me know it is true, the old tale of some wild, gypsy blood brought home by a soldier Hathaway for wife. But there is this difference, if you please, sir; I throw down my work because I have fought my fight and conquered it, am mistress of what I will in my household craft. Think you that I love the molding of butter and the care of poultry, or to spin, to cut, to sew, because I do them and do them well? It is not the thing I love, Will—it is in the victory I find the joy. I would conquer them to feel my power. Conquer your book, Will, stride ahead of your class, then play your fill till they arrive abreast of you again. But a laggard, a stupid, or a middling! And, in faith, the last is worst." [87]

They walked along, boy and young woman, she musing, he looking up with young ardor into her face. "You—you are so beautiful, Ann," the boy blurted forth, "and—and—no one understands as you do." [88]

She laid a hand on his shoulder and turned her dark eyes upon him. Teasing eyes they could be and mocking, yet sweet, too. Ah, sweet and tender through their laughter!

"Shall I tell you why I understand, Will Shakespeare, child?" Was she talking altogether to the boy, or above his head—aloud—as to herself? "I am a woman, Will, and at nineteen most such are already wife and mother, and I am still unwed. Shall I tell you why? We are but souls wandering and lonely in the dark, Will, other souls everywhere around, but scarce a groping hand that ever meets or touches our outstretched own. In all life we feel one such touch, perchance, or two. The rest we know no more than if they were not there. My father, great, simple, countryman's soul, I knew, Will, and Mary Shakespeare I know. Would she might learn she could do more with John through laughter, dear heart; but the right is ever stronger with Mary than the humor of the thing. My father and Mary I have known. And you, you I knew when in your rage you fell upon the maid, baby that you were at five, and beat her with your fists because she wantonly swept your treasures—a rose petal, a beetle wing, a pebble, a feather—into her kitchen fire. I knew you [92]

then, for so I had been beating at fate my life long. I knew you, Will, and, dear child, always since I have watched and understood. Rebel if you will; be free; but to be free, forget not, is to be conqueror over that within self first."

Will caught her hand; he whispered; his voice burned hot with a child's jealousy.

"'Tis said you are to wed Abraham Stripling, Ann, an' that the foreign doctor who wants to wed you, broke Abra'm's head with his pestle."

Ann Hathaway laughed; her eyes were mocking now; she backed against the lichened trunk of a giant elm by the roadside, a young, beauteous thing, and looked at the boy in scorn. "I to marry Abraham Stripling! Child though you are, you know me better than that. Did I not just tell you I am free now—free? That I have held fast to my duty, and so come to where I might be free? Have held them at bay—family, cousins, elders, sweethearts—until now, the rest married and gone, and the tasks as they gave them up come to be mine, my mother needs me, and my life may be my own—and free. For who has come to wed me? Did I not just say I was—I am—free? A soul groping lonely in the dark? No man's hand has reached toward mine that I, a woman and a weakling, could not shake off. When the masterful hand, groping, seizes mine, I shall know it, and I—I will kiss it with my lips—and—and follow after." [95]



"When the masterful hand, groping, seizes mine, I shall know it"

She came back to him as one from an ecstasy. "And now, child, go on home. It is late. And hurry or Mary will be fretting. You have had your cake and eaten it. Now go pay for it. 'Discipline must be maintained,' says your Welsh schoolmaster. And sure he will flog you."

XI

But no one at home had missed him. The Henley Street house was full of hurry and confusion when he arrived. No one noticed him. The neighbors came in and out, Mistress Sadler and Mistress Snelling, and the foreign doctor who would like to wed Ann, or passed on up to a room above, where little sister Annie, named for Ann Hathaway, lay dying of a sudden croup. And all since morning, since Will stole away. [97]

He knows this thing called Life, this deep inbreathing, this joy of shout, of run, of leap, of vault. He knows—strong healthy young animal—he knows this thing. But the other—this strange thing called Death: the darkened room; Father with his head fallen on his breast standing at the lattice [98]

gazing out at nothing; Mother kneeling, one arm outstretched across the bed, her head fallen thereon, and Mistress Sadler trying to raise and lead her away; and this—this waxen whiteness framed in flaxen baby rings on the pillow—this little stiffening hand outside the linen cover?

Will Shakespeare cries out. He has touched little sister Annie's hand and it is cold.



"This strange thing called Death...."

XII

[99]

And after that, things went worse in the Shakespeare household. All of John Shakespeare's ventures were proving failures. Debt pressed on every side. There began talk again of a mortgage on the Asbies estate, and this time none could say nay.

Dad went about with his head sunk on his breast, and at home sat staring in moody silence.



"Dad ... sat staring in moody silence"

"Don't, Mary, don't," he would say to Mother, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Take the children away. Instead of the name their father would have left them, 'John Shakespeare, Gentleman,' they are to read it—what?" [100]

"John, John," said Mother, "is there no more then in it all—our love, our lives—than pride?"

Pride! Will Shakespeare by now knew what it meant, and his heart went out to his father. He had felt the sting of this thing himself. It had been the year before. Dad had taken him behind him on his horse to Kenilworth, to see the masks and fireworks given by the Earl of Leicester in the Queen's honor. The gay London people come down with the court had sat in stands and galleries to witness the spectacle of the water pageant, breathing their perfumed breath down upon the country people crowding the ground below. And Will Shakespeare among these, at sight of the great Queen, had cheered with a lusty young throat and thrown his cap up with the rest. Will Shakespeare was the once chief bailiff's son. He was the son of Mary Arden of the Asbies. Though he never had thought about it one way or another, he had always known himself as good as the best. [103]

And so at Kenilworth, standing with the crowd and looking up at the jeweled folk in fine array casting their jokes and gibes down at the trammel, he had laughed, too, as honest as any. But when the time came for the water pageant, Dad had given him a lift up and a boost to the branches of a tree. And he had heard what she said, the lady upon whom he had from the first fixed his young gaze, the dark lady, with the jewels in her dusky hair, breathing lure and beauty and glamour. As he straddled the limb of his high perch that brought him so near her, he heard her cry out, her head thrown backward on her proud young throat: "Ah, the little beast, bringing the breath of the rabble up to our nostrils." [104]

And it was something like to what burned in young Will Shakespeare's soul then that Dad was feeling now. Will, big boy that he was, laid a hand on Dad's hand. Father looked up; their eyes met. [105]

Dad threw an arm about his shoulder and drew him close—father and son.

Something passed from the older to the younger. The boy squared his shoulders. The man in Will Shakespeare was born.

How best could he help Dad? So the lad pondered, meanwhile digging the sense piecemeal out of his *Ovid* for the morrow's lesson.

"It is the mind that makes the man, and our strength—measure—vigor"—any one of the three

words would do—"our measure is in our immortal souls."

Why—why is there truth in books? Had Ovid lived and been a man, a man who knew and fought it out himself? [106]

Will Shakespeare caught sight of a great and glorious kingdom he had not visioned before. The schoolmaster hitherto had talked in riddles.

XIII

[107]

Yet a year after this Will Shakespeare, just awakened to a love of letters, threw his books down. Mother's brown hair, as she leaned over her new child, Edmund, showed lines of gray. Dad, the day's trade over, sat brooding at home, and scarce would hie him forth, the fear of process for debt hanging over him.

Tall sturdy Will Shakespeare could buy up cattle and trade for hides as well as the butcher's son in Rother Market. Will Shakespeare threw down his books and went forth into the world—a man. [108]



"Tall, sturdy Will Shakespeare could buy up cattle ... as well as the butcher's son"

A man? A man, yes; once his stripling days of hot blood are over, days of rustic rout, of fight and wrestle, of deer-stealing, of wanderings with strolling players; a man, husband to Ann Hathaway, father of children, son of Mary Arden of the Asbies, Gentlewoman—of John Shakespeare, failure, who would be Gentleman; a man, this William Shakespeare, gone up to London to do a part in the world. In the world? This world wherein all is gain and nothing loss, does one but make it so; all is garnering; all is treasure; all, if so one deem it, is pageant, poetry, and drama; the rustic, the maid, the gammer, the tapster, the schoolboy, the master; the lubberfolk, the witch, the fairy, the elf, the goblin; the fat woman of Brentford, the man dwelling by the churchyard, Snelling, Sadler, Bardolph, Clowder, the old dog; the mummer, the wait, the revel, the cates and ale, the player strutting the stage as Herod; the sheep-shearing, the pedler, the glove; the white rose and the red; the Princes in the tower; St. George and victory; king, knight, soldier; the Avon sweetly flowing in its banks; the forest; the clouds rocking across the blue; stripling; the foreign doctor; queen, courtier, lady; love, life, death; hope, struggle, despair; pride, ambition, failure; vision, striving, achievement; wisdom, philosophy, contemplation; into the world where all is gain and nothing loss, does one make it so, went William Shakespeare of Stratford, to conquer. [111] [112]

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