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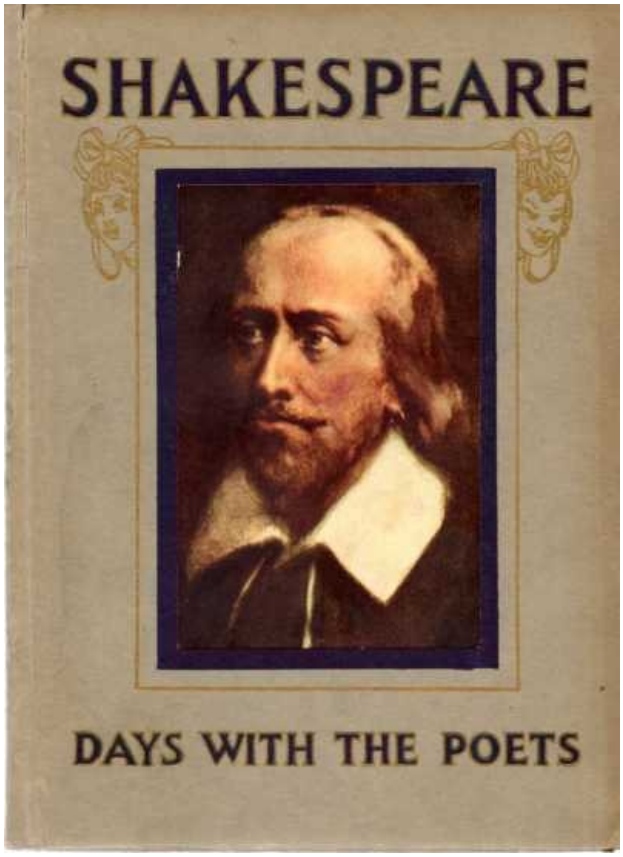
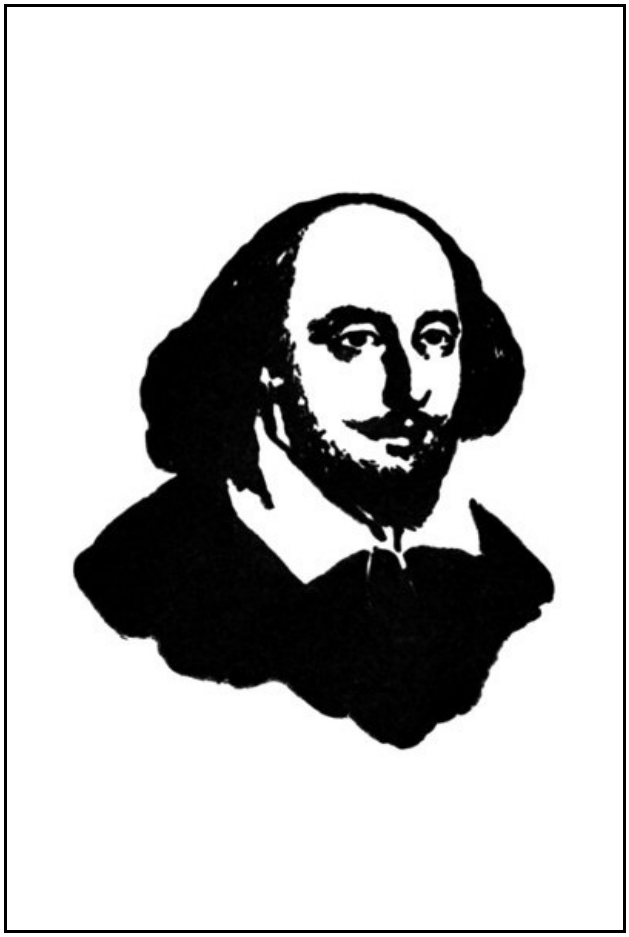


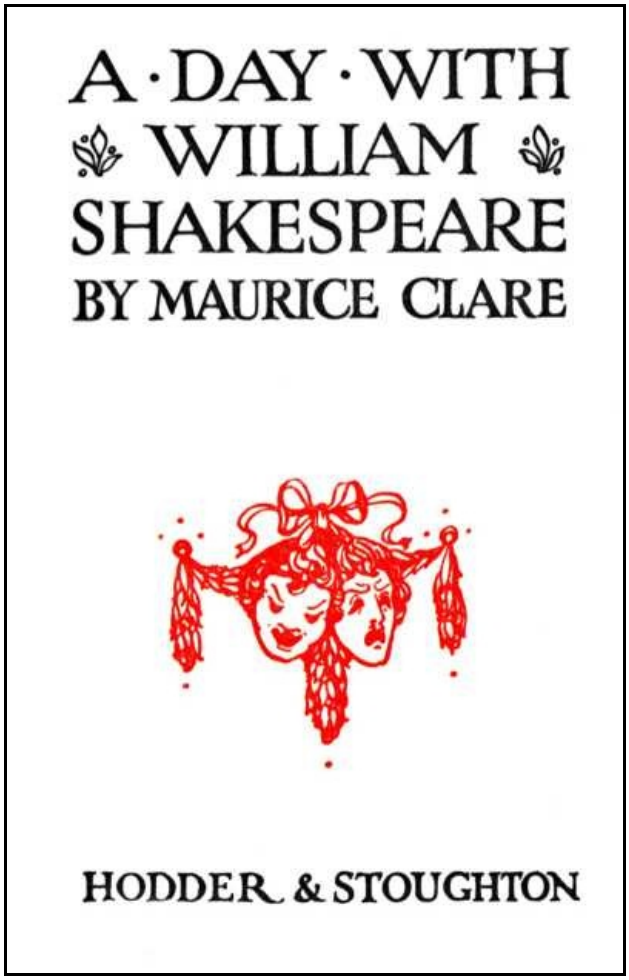
SHAKESPEARE
DAYS WITH POETS



"Some ardent love-scene in the rich dim gardens of Verona."

Juliet. This bud of love, by summer's ripening heat,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.
(Romeo and Juliet).

ROMEO AND JULIET.
Painting by W. Hatherill, R.I.



A DAY WITH WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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A DAY WITH WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

T was early on a bright June morning of the year 1599. The household of Christopher Mountjoy, the wig-maker, at the corner of Silver Street in Cripplegate, was already up and astir. Mountjoy, his wife and daughter, and his apprentice, Stephen Bellott, were each refreshing themselves with a hasty mouthful—one could not term it breakfast—before beginning their day's work. For town wig-makers were busy folk, then as now. Every fashionable dame wore "transformations," and some noble ladies, like the late Queen of Scots and—breathe it low—the great Elizabeth herself, changed the colour of their tresses every day.

Breakfast, in 1599, was a rite "more honoured in the breach than in the observance." Most people, having supped with exceeding heartiness the previous night, ignored breakfast altogether: especially as dinner would occur some time between 10 and 12 a.m. Those who could not go long without food had no idea of a regular sit-down meal during that precious morning hour which "has a piece of gold in its mouth." They contented themselves with beaten-up eggs in muscadel wine, as now the Mountjoy family; who, being of French origin, boggled somewhat at the only alternative—a very English one—small ale and bread-and-butter.

To these good folk, standing up and swallowing their morning draught, entered their well-to-do lodger, Mr. William Shakespeare, up betimes like them—for he was a very busy person,—and shared their jug of eggs and muscadel. Mr. Shakespeare was thirty-five years of age, "a handsome, well-shap't man," in the words of his friend Aubrey,—his eyes light hazel, his hair and beard auburn. He still retained, in some degree, the complexion which accompanies auburn hair, and this imparted a tinge of delicacy to his sensitive and mobile face. He was already slightly inclined to *embonpoint*: for in the seventeenth century people aged soon, and thirty-five was much more like forty-five nowadays.

In all company, with all people, Shakespeare was charmingly pleasant-spoken. He had long since shed any provincial *gaucherie*, and was of an exquisite courtesy, "of a very ready and pleasant smooth wit,"—again to quote his intimates, "a good-natured man, of a great sweetness in his bearing, and a most agreeable company." Moreover, that indefinable ease of bearing, which accrues with success, was evident in the gracious *bonhomie* of his mien. For, after many years of stress and struggle, many hard bouts with fortune, innumerable humiliations and adverse events, he was now prosperous, popular, possessed of this world's goods. Although a self-made man in every sense of the word,—although still a member of that despised theatrical profession against which the pulpit thundered, at which the decent citizen looked askance,—he was a distinctly marked personality, not to be ignored. He was part proprietor of the *Globe* Theatre, the *Blackfriars*, and the *Rose*,—he had house property in Southwark and Blackfriars, lands and houses at Stratford-upon-Avon. He had obtained a coat-of-arms for his family from the College of Heralds, thus constituting himself legally a "gentleman"; he was the brilliant author of immensely popular plays. And he was reputed to earn at the rate of £600 per annum—which would be now worth nearly eight times as much.

Such was the man who presently sauntered out into the summer sunlight, this June morning, and went leisurely westward towards Holborn. He strolled along, thoughtfully ruminating the day's work before him, but courteously alert to every greeting from passing acquaintances in the streets. He encountered, as he went, warm and invigorating scents, which floated round each corner—and rose, for the nonce, above the malodours of the open gutter—pleasant midsummer perfumes which were exhaled, in the clear and smokeless air of those days, from a multiplicity of blossoming London gardens. For every house had its private garden, large or small. Every householder garnished his dwelling-rooms with flowers, instead of ornaments of potter's ware or metal: the floors were still strewn with leaves and grasses, and the doorways often decked with boughs. Cherries and strawberries were ripening in the ancient monastery gardens, among the majestic precincts of ruined priories: blackbirds were singing in the trees. If the actual dewy freshness of the Warwickshire water-meadows were not present in the London air—if the wild roses of the Avon-side did not bloom in Holborn—yet Shakespeare had only to close his eyes one moment, to project himself back into his boyhood's scenes. For London was emphatically a "garden city," encircled by forests, and fields, and farms, and wooded hills; and the ecstatic sweetness of an English June was wafted over its cobbled thoroughfares.

Of all seasons, this was the most enjoyable to Shakespeare—because of his passion for flowers. He delighted to make long luscious lists of flowers—their very names were a pleasure to him, each fraught with its own special significance. He loved to write of

> Daffodils,
> That come before the swallow dares, and take
> The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
> But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
> Or Cytherea's breath: pale primroses....
> The crown-imperial,—lilies of all kinds,
> The flower-de-luce being one.

—to collect, in imagination,

> Roses, their sharp spines being gone,

Not royal in their scent alone,
    But in their hue.
    Maiden pinks of odour faint,
Daisies smell-less yet most quaint,
    And sweet thyme true;

"Carnations and streaked gillyflowers," and all the lovely company of the garden, were a joy to him; and equally so the wild flowers in woodlands where "the wild thyme grows, And oxlips and the nodding violet blows," over which the south wind breathes softly, "stealing and giving odour." Beneath the tangled woodbines and musk-roses, the poet could linger in fantasy, if not in fact,—in dream, if not in deed. A passionate enjoyment of wild nature distinguished him pre-eminently above all his town-bred compeers. Trees and birds and forest brooks, but flowers especially, claimed an equal place with music in his affections. Beauty of sight and sound appealed, with magic power, to the man on whom the robuster joys failed to make any permanent mark. For towards all the salient characteristics of the Elizabethan age,—the volcanic vigour, the incandescent longing for adventure, the magnificent dare-devilry of seamanship, the fierce and splendid valour, inciting men to desperate deeds,—William Shakespeare was strangely impassive and unimpressionable. The wave of Elizabethan ardour surged past, and left him not even sprinkled by its spray. He was quite content to go on clothing with new flesh—glowing and Giorgione-like—the antique bones of old romances; to infuse new life into forgotten mediæval episodes, crudely treated by his predecessors, the men who supplied stock plays for travelling companies. He preferred some ardent love-scene in the rich, dim gardens of Verona to all the opulent possibilities of the New World: some pageantry in Venice or in Athens to any present splendour of the Elizabethan court. He secretly revelled, with conscious and justifiable pride, in pouring forth imperial passages of words, reverberant with rolling sound; but frequently, for the sheer pleasure of musical effect, as it would seem, he introduced those exquisite lyrics,—bird-like in their careless spontaneity, flower-like in their grace and daintiness,—which float like flakes of thistledown above his plays. These songs say all that need be said: they condense into a few swift words the essential spirit of a whole drama. So in *Othello*:

"My mother had a maid call'd Barbara," says Desdemona, standing unwittingly upon the threshold of death,

    "She had a song of 'willow';
An old thing 'twas, *but it expressed the future*,
And she died singing it. That song, to-night,
Will not go from my head."

The most apparently casual and irrelevant ditties of Shakespeare's dramas, in like manner, "express the future" of the story.

"Come unto these yellow sands,
And there take hands"....

So, eventually, Ferdinand and Miranda avow their mutual love beside the lapping of the long blue waves.

"Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,"—

might be the very *leit-motiv* of *As You Like It*.

"Sigh no more, ladies,—ladies, sigh no more,
    Men were deceivers ever:
One foot on sea, and one on shore,
    To one thing constant never,"—

—here you have the treachery of Don John, and the vacillating mistrust of Claudio, succinctly summed up.

"Journeys end in lovers' meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know,"—

thus the Clown in *Twelfth Night* becomes mouthpiece of the *dénouement* which was never long in doubt.

To every man his *métier*: and that of William Shakespeare was not to be the mouthpiece of those "spacious times," tingling with sensation, with excitement, with huge enterprise. Exhibiting, throughout, the curious patient persistence of the essential Midlander, he had worked his way right up from the bottom rung of the ladder. The ill-mated young man of twenty-three, who had left Stratford with a travelling company of players in 1587,—who had (whether conscious or unconscious of his genius) plodded industriously onward as a literary hack of drama—tinkering, adapting, re-shaping and re-writing the stale old stock plays, until they suffered a change "into

something rich and strange,"—whose colossal greatness his contemporaries were not great enough to appreciate;—that same man was now arriving—like so many other Midlanders—at a point where criticism could not touch him. He had gained no giddy pinnacle of sudden success, but a safe and solid summit of assured position. That he should attain it in his own way, and after his own methods,—that, after all, was his business. There were plenty of other poets to utter *Arma virumque cano*. William Shakespeare preferred to link himself with thoughts of Italy, and fairy-folk, and "the sea-coast of Bohemia,"—with youth and palaces and forests, and fortunate or frustrate love. His range and scope were enormous, if he cared: his output astonishing, if he chose.... Meanwhile, it was mid-summer and there were roses....

"Ferdinand and Miranda avow their mutual love, beside the lapping of the long blue waves."

Ferdinand. Here's my hand.

Miranda. And mine, with my heart in't.

(*The Tempest*).

FERDINAND AND MIRANDA.
Painting by Edmund Dulac.

Moving meditatively along Holborn, he presently encountered his old friend Gerard the botanist, whose *Herball* had been published two years before,—who stood at the head of his profession for knowledge and achievement. He lived in Holborn, where he had not only a fine garden-ground, but a fruit-ground in Fetter Lane, which he superintended for the surgical society of which he was a member.

"Well met, Will!" said the grave and reverend herbalist, "no other man in London would I more gladly welcome: for that thou hast a most worthy apprehension of the seemliness of plants and herbs. Country blood, country blood, good sir! Come, now, into my poor enclosure and let me regale thee with new and marvellous things.... What! it is but eight o' the clock! The paltry playhouse shall not claim thee yet awhile. What are all Euripides his dramas, in comparison with that wherewith I shall rejoice thine eyes?"

And, seizing the poet's hand, Gerard drew him through a side-door into his beloved garden. "Behold!" he exclaimed, "the Apple of Love, *Pomum Aureum*!"—and, with ineffable pride, he pointed out some slowly-ripening tomatoes. "These grow in Spain, Italy and such hot countries, from whence myself have received seeds for my garden, where, as thou seest, they do grow and prosper.... Howbeit there be other golden apples, which the poets do fable growing in the

gardens of the daughters of Hesperus. These,"—he added regretfully, "I have not."

"Master Gerard, there shall no golden apples ever come to England worthy to compare with yours," remarked the dramatist, luxuriously inhaling the warm June scents shut closely within sun-baked walls, and gazing down the coloured vistas and aisles of bloom. "Here's flowers for you!" he murmured to himself,

> "Here's a plenty of sweet herbs!
> Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram,
> The marigold that goes to bed with the sun,
> And with him rises weeping: these are flowers
> Of middle summer. And I think they are given
> To men of middle age."

"Sithee here again," continued Gerard, well launched upon his favourite topic, "this plant, which is called of some Skyrrits of Peru, is generally called of us, Potatus or Potatoes,"—and he waved his hand towards a bed of sweet potatoes. "Of these roots may be made conserves, toothsome, wholesome and dainty, and many comfortable and restorative sweetmeats. Other potatoes there be, which some do use with salt,—but of these I have no present apprehension."

Shakespeare was not paying attention to the potatoes. On his knees beside a strawberry bed, he looked up with a laughing face. "Methinks I would rather fresh fruit than conserves," said he, filling his mouth with much satisfaction.

"Then, of the Indian pot-herb, tobacco," the botanist proceeded, "give me joy that I have had good fortune in three kinds thereof,—the Henbane of Peru, the Trinidada Tobacco, and the pigmy or dwarfish sort. But, indeed, this same tobacco is by no means to be commended as a fume or smoking-medicine. The juice, boiled with sugar into a syrup, is a sovereign cure for many maladies. I pray you, good Master Shakespeare," said he, earnestly seizing the other's arm and punctuating his words with a gentle see-saw movement, "believe me, that any other herb of hot temperature will suffice for pipe-smoking—rosemary, thyme, winter savory, sweet marjoram and such-like."

"Faith, I am no great smoker," replied Shakespeare, as with a dexterous jerk he eluded his friend and dived down an alley of damask roses. "Here," said he, "I shall play the robber,—" He gathered a rose and set it behind his ear in the most approved Court fashion. "I would fain linger all day among these manifold sweetnesses," he added, "but alack! I have need to hasten now. I pray you, therefore, give me leave to depart." The herbalist, talking volubly, accompanied him to the door.

The playwright turned down towards Blackfriars: on his way he entered an apothecary's shop, and, heedless of Master Gerard's warnings, purchased a "rich smoke" at sixpence a pipeful—(equivalent to, perhaps, four shillings of our money). This was no cheap and adulterated mixture, such as the "groundlings" used, but the very best procurable: and, to emphasise its *recherché* quality, it was kept in a lily-pot, minced on a maple-block, served out with silver tongs, and lighted from a little fire of juniper shavings. Shakespeare, having thus filled his long clay pipe, proceeded to the Blackfriars shore, where he took a ferry-boat across to Bankside in Southwark and entered the *Globe* Theatre, of which he was part proprietor. It may here be explained that, every theatre having recently been banished from the City as the very quintessence of disreputability and root of all evil, the exiled players had taken refuge south of the river, in Bankside: which, being a quarter singularly ill-famed, was considered by all reputable citizens a most appropriate situation for them. The *Globe*, like other public playhouses of the period, was roofless: three stories high, with boxes all round in tiers, the ground tier paled with oaken boards and fenced with strong iron pikes. The stage, which had a "shadow" or cover over it, was some 40 ft. wide and extended to the middle of the yard or pit. At the back of the stage was a balcony, over the entrance from the "tiring-house" or dressing-rooms. It was lighted, if necessary, by branched candlesticks, while "cressets" (tarred ropes' ends in cages) were set in front of the boxes.

The *Globe* company of about ten actors, Burbage, Heminge, Condell, Field and the rest, were entering by ones and twos, with the boys who played women's parts: last of all, the orchestra of ten performers, the largest in London, dawdled in, and took up their instruments—chiefly drums and trumpets. The rehearsal commenced—the play of *Hamlet*, with Burbage in the title-rôle. Shakespeare, though necessarily present, paid but little attention to the business in hand. In studied and self-conscious acting he had no interest whatsoever. His theory was the same as Ben Jonson's, that a man should act "freely, carelessly, and capriciously, as if one's veins ran with quicksilver, and not utter a phrase but shall come forth in the very brine of conceit, and sparkle like salt in fire." But this was too high a criterion to impose upon his company. He therefore left them chiefly to their own devices, under the capable management of Burbage, and remained himself in the tiring-room, employed upon his usual morning's avocation, revising and revivifying old "stock" plays, and considering fresh MSS., which arrived in vast numbers—and accepting as much as he could. For he was incapable of jealousy: he "did his greatness easily," and was the kindest of friends, the most indulgent of critics, to would-be dramatic authors. His acquaintance with Ben Jonson had originated in "a remarkable piece of humanity and good-nature." Jonson, unknown and unaccredited, had offered a play to the theatre. "But the persons into whose hands it was put, after turning it carelessly and superficially over, were just upon returning it to him,

with an ill-natured answer, that it would be of no service to their company, when Shakespeare luckily cast his eye upon it, and found something so well in it, as to encourage him to read it through, and afterwards to recommend Ben Jonson and his writings to the public." (Rowe) Similar experiences befell many a budding stage writer: Shakespeare's singular sweetness of disposition led him to be lavish of praise as of money. He was "always willing to touch up this man's play, or write in an act for that one." And of no other man did he utter a cruel or an injurious word. "A kinder gentleman treads not the earth," his intimates might have said of him, as he of Antonio.

"The young gallants were glad when the Play-scene was over."

> *Hamlet.* He poisons him in the garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago.
>
> (*Hamlet*).

THE PLAY-SCENE IN *HAMLET*.
Painting by W. G. Simmonds.

Yet it might almost be averred that William Shakespeare found himself a dramatist by accident. He accepted from the first the conditions of a life despised and contemned, the life of the actor classed with rogues and vagabonds, banished with contumely into ignominious neighbourhoods. "He looked upon the half-art of acting with disdain and disgust": he saw his worst plays performed much more frequently than his best. By nature a poet *pur et simple*, of a delicate, fastidious, bookish temperament, one who continually corrected his best verses with endless pains and critical scrupulosity—he had been thrown into the rowdy pot-house company of second-rate actors, and was accused by jealous rivals of being "an upstart crow," swelled out with inordinate vanity—or gibed at, by those who professed themselves his friends, as a slovenly and careless writer—or openly contemned by the very lackeys and menials, should he receive a call to Court. And this was only one of the darker sides to the life of this gentle-natured, cheerful, seemingly successful man. The others, as we shall presently perceive, were, in some sense, infinitely more tragic.

The rehearsal over, and the hungry actors pouring forth to obtain their dinner at the nearest taverns or cookshops, Shakespeare (who had, as we know, already broken fast) re-crossed the river and paced quietly up towards St. Paul's Churchyard, to visit the booksellers' shops. The Signs of the *White Greyhound*, the *Angel*, the *Spread Eagle*, the *Green Dragon*, the *Flower de Luce*, and so on, were the recognised rendezvous for men of letters, and Shakespeare's own earlier works, such as *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece*, *Henry IV*, and *Richard II*, were issued at

several of these shops. Here he could foregather with learned and literary friends; here he could sit and study the latest books; here, in short, he was no longer the actor, but the author. And it may be noted in passing, that Shakespeare's literary *confrères* respected him, not as the permanent dramatist of the *Globe*, the transmuter of old lead into gold of Ophir—but as a lyrical poet, an authentic "maker" of beautiful verse. "The Muses would speak Shakespeare's fine filed phrase if they could speak English," so ran the encomium of his admirers. His "sugared sonnets," they declared, were of surpassing excellence and charm. "His facetious (pleasant) grace in writing," as they termed it, "which approves (proves) his art," was that of the sonneteer, not the playwright. That state and majesty, that knowledge of human nature, which distinguish his dramatic work, seemed, to his contemporaries, quite foreign to the man they knew, the witty, gracious, graceful poet.

After a short look-in at his favourite bookshops, Shakespeare proceeded to another popular rendezvous—the middle aisle of St. Paul's. This was no sequestered haunt of studious folk, but a busy promenade where all sorts and conditions of men met freely, by appointment or otherwise: here one might encounter the down-at-heels adventurer, the "masterless man or penniless companion," side by side with the rubicund citizen, the opulent merchant, and the country gentleman whose talk was of hawks and hounds. Every condition of character, every variety of type, was here for Shakespeare's sharp eyes to scan: every fragment of conversation that fell upon his keen ears was noted down almost automatically. Friends and acquaintances many were here to be encountered: the popular writer received salutations on every hand, and those who might benefit by his well-known laxity of purse were not slow to avail themselves of it. Money frequently changed hands before Shakespeare passed out of the Cathedral. He had the customary careless generosity of stage-folk, and the fact that he was reputed to spend as much as he earned was doubtless largely due to his lavish freehandedness. Nobody could look into that kindly face and expect a *No* to any asking.

But now it was striking twelve on every clock in the City, and he turned into Cheapside to the *Mermaid*, which stood between Friday Street and Bread Street. In those days, few except the upper classes dined at home. The "restaurant habit" of the twentieth century prevailed among middle-class townsfolk—especially those who were only lodgers, or visitors in London: and the cook-shops, ordinaries, and taverns laid themselves out to provide such hearty dinners as were necessary to people who had only two meals a day.

Upon the table to which Shakespeare sat down there were a stewed rabbit, a roast capon, a salmon stuck with cloves, and a piece of boiled beef; a jug of ale, a flagon of white wine (sack or canary) and a quart of claret. Honey was poured over the meat, and the wine-cups were half full of sugar. For the Elizabethans loved "sugar and spice and all things nice." Every dish was highly seasoned, highly sweetened, and spiced to what we should call a nauseating point. Cooked vegetables were but little used: these strong meat-eaters disdained them; potatoes were not yet indispensable articles of diet. Herbs, fruits, and roots, in fact, played a very secondary part in town fare, though poor folk in country places must needs make shift with these. The plates were of bread, the dishes of wood, and the wine was poured into small green clay pots.

"The whimsical, delightful, happy-go-lucky humour which he has put into the mouths of so many merry folk."

> *Clown.* Well, God give them wisdom, that have it; and
> those that are fools, let them use their talents.
>
> (*Twelfth Night*).

THE CLOWN AND MARIA.
Painting by W. Heath Robinson.

Shakespeare did not linger over his dinner. Naturally no great eater, and by the robust, full-blooded Elizabethans considered a very poor drinker, he was lost in thought. That customary flow of scintillating wit, which made him the life and centre of a crowd—that nervous, excitable, impatient brilliance which often characterized him in company—seemed awhile to have forsaken him. To the irrelevant ups and downs of the artistic temperament he was singularly subject. Various familiar friends passed in and out, with loud and jolly greetings: Mr. Will Shakespeare was hail-fellow-well-met with all men, from carters to courtiers. But to-day Mr. Will Shakespeare only smiled at them with a humorous, pensive air, and retired yet further into himself.

What was saddening and silencing him? Had a sudden distaste for his occupation seized upon his sensitive mind? Had some slight been put upon him by careless young nobles, such as my lords Pembroke or Southampton, who take up a man one day and drop him the next? Had he received ill news from Stratford, as when the tidings arrived, three years ago, of the death of his only little son? Or was he simply cogitating one of his "sugared sonnets"?

Thus the quidnuncs of the *Mermaid* questioned among themselves: and there was much surmising, and putting of heads together, and wagering upon the thoughts of Master Shakespeare's melancholy: for of a surety he had lost his wonted flow of spirits. But only one or two men guessed truly at the secret troubles that sat heavy on his cheerful, mercurial mind.

Seventeen years ago, at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare had made a hasty and ill-assorted marriage. Anne Hathaway, his senior in years, his inferior in position, was no fit mate for the impetuous, ambitious youth. A father at nineteen, with neither employment nor source of income, he had chafed and fretted for five years against the consequences of his own rash folly: at twenty-three, he found the position intolerable. He quitted Stratford, and had never returned, save for brief and flying visits. Nor had he ever brought up his wife and children to London. He was maintaining them in comfort, he was purchasing a fine house in Stratford, whither he would eventually retire and play the parts of husband and father. But—blame him or not, as you will—there are limits beyond which human nature cannot be forced: and the illiterate, ill-tempered, incompatible Anne Hathaway was the skeleton in Shakespeare's cupboard: not to be explained away—the thought of whom left a bitter taste at the bottom of every pleasure.

So far, things were bad enough; but there was even worse to follow. The lad whose calf-love had flung him into ill-considered matrimony was now a mature man—and two years ago he discovered, for the first time, what the love of mature manhood can be like. With equal folly, equal recklessness, to his first affair, he had conceived a desperate and hopeless affection for a woman who exactly reversed the previous conditions—for she was very much younger than himself, better educated, and of much superior rank. The "dark lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets, upon whom he lavished all his golden wealth of phrase, laying open the most intimate secrets of human love, and scorn, and anguish—was (in all probability) Mary Fitton, a girl of nineteen, maid of honour to the Queen. Proud, high-spirited, vivacious—unquestionably beautiful, although "in

the old age black was not counted fair"—aristocratic, *grande dame* to the finger-tips: in every respect the antithesis of countrified, shrewish, repellent Anne Hathaway—yet the "dark lady" was inherently wanton, false, and faithless. Shakespeare recognised this, but it made no difference to the strength and intensity of his passion:

> So true a fool is love, that in your will,
> Though you do anything, he thinks no ill.

In sonnet after sonnet he expressed his despair, his patience of contempt or injury. No such sounding of the whole diapason of love—no such revealing of a tortured human heart—has ever been put before the world.

> Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme.

And he depicted various features of this woman, in various rôles, in play after play: he could not shut her out. Whether he pilloried her dark beauty as Cressida or Cleopatra—whether he masked her wit and spirit under the name of Beatrice or Rosalind—whether he alternately implored or inveighed against her in the Sonnets—he was enthralled by so magnetic a fascination that it influenced his art at all points. Shakespeare the man—Shakespeare the artist—was obsessed by—bound fast in—a hopeless infatuation for a woman whom he knew to be unworthy.

Here, indeed, was sufficient matter for musing. But the poet's unhappy reveries were cut short by the appearance of a young man—his brother Edmund, who had recently arrived in London and obtained a small acting post at the *Blackfriars* Theatre. He addressed the older man with a mixture of respect and boyish naïveté. "Good Will, lend me a groat or so—ere I perish of sheer hunger. Six long hours have I laboured at their plaguy rehearsal, and I have not a penny to my pocket. In faith, I never starved like this in Stratford. I swear I will repay thee two days hence!"

The elder brother, with his easy, tolerant air waved the lad to a seat, and shouted for the drawer, or waiter. "Anon, anon, Sir!" and that functionary hastened up. The *Mermaid* was emptying now, and the attendants were less hurried and flurried. Shakespeare ordered in a second dinner—for, little though he had eaten, the food was cold: and, patting his brother affectionately on the shoulder, slipped a handful of money into his hand. "Ay, marry, thou hast a good Warwickshire hunger and thirst, Ned," said he, "let it not cry out upon thee in vain. For me, I am away to the *Globe*. They play *Hamlet* there to-day, and needs must I be present." He did not wait for thanks, but, with his peculiarly pleasant smile, slipped out of the *Mermaid*, and made haste towards his theatre.

"Like the three wanderers in Arden, against the bole of a huge oak."

> *Touchstone*. The more fool I, to be in Arden!
> (*As You Like It*).

ROSALIND, CELIA AND TOUCHSTONE.
Painting by Hugh Thomson.

The *Globe* was already crowded when he arrived, although the play did not begin till three (there were no evening performances in those days, except in noblemen's private theatres). Burbage, the favourite tragedian, as *Hamlet*, drew a great following: but the humble part played by the author himself as *Rosencrantz* was a *succès d'estime* rather than a genuine one—for Mr. William Shakespeare was no very wonderful actor. "A fellowship in a cry of players" held little glamour for him. The man who could imagine, with every vivid circumstance of detail, the sinister and foreboding atmosphere of Elsinore, had little admiration for the "strutting and bellowing" of the players who interpreted his visions....

On either side of the stage sat the young noblemen, the poetasters, and the shorthand writers who worked for private publishers. In the boxes—priced up to half-a-crown (about £1 of our present money) were various aristocratic and wealthy patrons of the play. The "groundlings" obtained standing room in the pit for a penny (say 6d.) and were vociferous in their applause of the sanguinary scenes, of the Gravediggers, and of the grosser jests. Everyone who could afford it, smoked: the "classes," rich authentic tobacco, and the "masses," men and women alike, an adulterated mixture of coltsfoot and other "hot" herbs. As for the middle classes, the merchant-folk, tradesmen, and *bourgeoisie* in general, they were chiefly conspicuous by their absence. Strongly pervaded by a growing flavour of Puritanism, and having a wholesome decent horror of "play-acting" as something undoubtedly congruous with all dissolute ways and ill-living, the middle classes avoided Bankside like the pestilence. Had they been present, they would have been sorely put to it to understand what in the world Mr. Shakespeare, through the mouth of Hamlet, was gibing at. Was he decrying actors? Was he contemning audiences? Was he scorching, with bitter disdain, all who wrote for, or acted in, or crowded into playhouses?... The young gallants, uncomfortable and uncertain, were glad when the Play-scene was over, and one arrived at more familiar matters of battle, murder, and sudden death. Too much metaphysics about this Hamlet fellow, so they held. A dramatist should stick to his last, and not drag his hearers into deep waters of conjecture, where a man might well flounder for ever....

The play was over. Some few adventurous spirits from the audience approached the tire-room door: Heminge held it warily ajar. "I would speak with your author: where is he?"—"I would have a word with Mr. Shakespeare: is he within?" "Not this way, I assure you, sir: we are not so officiously befriended by him, as to have his presence in the tiring-house, to prompt us aloud, stamp at the book-holder, swear for our properties, curse the poor tireman, rail the music out of time, and sweat for every venial trespass we commit."—"Was it not Mr. Shakespeare, then, that played the part of Rosencrantz?" enquired the bewildered ones. "Close the door!" thundered Burbage from within. Followed a sound of bolts and bars.... Meanwhile, Mr. Shakespeare had disappeared from the malodorous precincts of the *Globe*—for the adjacent bear-gardens were notorious for evil effluvia—had crossed the river, and was making his way to the *Mermaid*, where he arrived about six. A plentiful supper was already being partaken of: the rooms were full of steam and savoury smells. Supper was a smaller meal than dinner, but in no way stinted.

Lettuces and radishes were usually served first, and afterwards a variety of highly flavoured dishes. Pigeons stuffed with green gooseberries, fiercely-seasoned herring-pies, roast pork with green sorrel sauce—mustard, horseradish, ginger, and honey *ad lib*, and sweet dishes innumerable. Shakespeare did justice to his food, and took copious draughts of light sweet wine: the morning's melancholy had passed away, and was succeeded by an almost feverish gaiety. The artificial stimulus of the theatre had produced a temporary excitement in him—he was flushed, brilliant, loquacious. As his repartees flashed rapier-like across the room, Ben Jonson smiled grimly, seated at the head of the table, and a score of kindred souls, who surrounded it, relished the *verve* and sparkle of their favourite comrade. Jonson was a man of great size, of immense strength and personal courage—masterful, domineering, jealous. He recognised and allowed the extraordinary genius of Shakespeare—but always with many detractions, "insinuating his incorrectness, or a careless manner of writing, and a want of judgment." That the Stratford shopkeeper's son, utterly unequipped in scholarship or training, should stand so high in popular estimation above himself—the University graduate of great learning—was acutely annoying to Jonson: it may be, too, that, with the littleness of certain minds, he had never forgiven Shakespeare for doing him a good turn in the matter of his comedies. At any rate he resented the Warwickshire man's unparalleled quickness, brightness, and flexibility of tongue; and every evening he inaugurated a duel of words, which almost invariably resulted in a "draw," and which was the delight of those privileged to be present. "At the *Mermaid*," says Fuller, one of these favoured auditors, "many were the wit-combats between Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, which two I beheld like a Spanish great galleon and English man of war. Master Jonson (like the former) was built far higher in learning, solid, but slow in his performance. Shakespeare, like the English man of war, lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, could turn with all sides, tack about, and take advantage of all winds by the quickness of his wit and invention." And thus it befell that the frequenters of the *Mermaid*—such notabilities as Raleigh, Fletcher, Marlowe, Beaumont, Greene, —were accustomed to hear these two great poets disputing, and to join the tournament, in words (as Beaumont put it)

> So nimble and so full of subtle flame,
> As if that everyone from whence they came
> Had meant to put his whole wit in a jest,
> And had resolved to live a fool the rest
> Of his dull life.

Hours passed swiftly away in this congenial manner. The amazing fluency and readiness of Shakespeare showed no sign of flagging: the whimsical, delightful, happy-go-lucky humour, which he has put into the mouths of so many merry folk, was still at its most laughter-provoking stage,—when suddenly, by one of his customary revulsions of feeling, he was seized by a great distaste for the heated apartment, the flaring light, the stale odours of wine and ale. Like Cassius, he had "poor, unhappy brains for drinking," and the endless potations due at a city tavern were singularly unsuited to his taste. He felt that he would give a thousand bursts of *Mermaid* applause, "for an acre of barren ground, long heath, brown furze," anything that was out in the clean pure air. Though he was a thorough townsman outwardly, the ineradicable instincts of a countryman tore at his heart. He hankered after rural doings and the rough deep speech of the shires. He did not pause to explain the cause of this sudden yearning to men who could hardly be expected to understand it. He simply followed his own immediate inclination. Making a hasty and inadequate excuse, he escaped into the street; and, setting off northward and alone, he struck up across the fields. The delicate scent of hay was wafted warmly round him. Every hedgerow was a blaze of blossom, roses, honeysuckle, elder; every brook was fringed with meadowsweet and loosestrife. Among these exquisitely calm surroundings, what worth had the sordid and squalid matters of the stage, with its petty ambitions, its puny failures or successes? The boisterous conviviality of the *Mermaid*, the dazzling interchange of thrust and parry, his own reputation as a "fellow of infinite jest," and a nobly-endowed poet, all sank away into nothing, as the midsummer twilight, a glimmering grey translucence, slowly replaced the splendours of the day.

"O Jupiter, how weary are my spirits!" sighed Shakespeare, like his own Rosalind, as, flinging himself beneath the broad and leafy boughs, he became submerged in the infinite, the maternal peace of Nature. Shortly, as darkness deepened, he would return to his lonely room in Silver Street, challenged by the watch and replying in some gay jest: shortly he would toss upon a sleepless bed, consumed by violent and varied emotions, until the cooler wind that comes with dawn should soothe him into rest. But now he lay, like the three wanderers in Arden, against the bole of a huge oak, watching the glow-worms gleaming around and the stars stealing forth above him: until the floor of Heaven was "all o'erlaid with patines of bright gold," and the day, by that celestial sign, was ended.

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