

WILL SHAKESPEARE'S LITTLE LEAD

CHAPTER XIX

The miserable had no other medicine, but only hope.

Measure For Measure. Do you not know I am a woman? when I think I must speak.

As you like it. Judith raised the latch of Mistress Hathaway's cottage door and slipped quickly into the house, letting the door slam to lock of her with such force that all the casements rattled as violently as if the North wind had descended upon them in its fury.

"Grandam," she shouted, "Grandam." She paused for a moment to listen. There was no one in the living-room, but from the buttry beyond there came the sound of voices, and thither she directed her steps, calling as she ran.

"Oh! ay, ay," her grandmother replied, testily, being in a peevish humor that morning, "an' thou'dst give a body time to speak I'd answer thee. La, I do detest thee more unmanly than any boy, 'tis a mercy an' my door be left on 's hinge. But come thou hither, thy face is steaming like a yule-fire pudding and as tart as a lemon."

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not hither, and that's the long and short o' it."

"Ay, truly, we know that now; only then, just to think o' his being here of the wind and we—for 'twas grievous storm—made the house pleasant to us again and we could e'en sleep sweet, but—"

Judith's voice broke and she went on with a sob, "but in the morning betimes, before ever the bidding-bell had sounded or we were ready for church, he came creeping home. Oh! thou'dst scarce have known him, his face was so white and hither, and all draw up, and his clothes were torn and wet and he had no shirt on 's poor back. At first methought 'twas some beggar lad—I was e'en springing forth to see if Hammet would come when I saw how close I saw who it was, and out I ran. 'Twas raining, and so softly, too, and when I came up to him I saw that he was half bearing Silver and half leading him, and—"

"Cheerily, true heart, cheerily now, here's a Jude come to meet thee."

"At that I cried out:—"

"Nay, what hath befallen thee, sweet brother, thou'rt sore hurt? For I could see his arms were all cut and bleeding."

"And he said:—"

"'Tis little matter about my hurts, they're naught, 'tis only my true Silver here that suffereth. Help me to bear him better, but gently—gently. So, dear heart, so, will not pain thee—we be home at last."

"And there we were, and all the others came crowding to the door to meet us, but Hammet had no word to say about himself. When we put Silver down upon the floor he needs must rise, and Grandam Shakespeare, seeing how he felt, to humour him did say that she'd e'en wash it w' her own hands, and lay salve upon it, if only he would get off his wet clothes and go to bed. But he answered and said:—"

"I cry thee pardon, sweet grandam, I must e'en see to the wound myself; 'twas had for my sake, and Silver, thou know'st, is my very own. Cross me not, I'll wash it, and thou may'st do w' me as thou wilt."

"Then he undid the wrappings that were made from his own shirt, torn small, and showed all grievously hurt out on Silver's shoulder, and he bathed it so careful that Silver did not even wince. And when 'twas all made fair, Hammet turned him to my grandam and gave her thanks."

"Now a weak woman and a fond! An' I'd been there I trow no dog should have served before 's master. Mistress Shakespeare hath a soft heart, though verily an' thou'dst not know it, she can be firm enow. And she liketh her own way—as 'tis ever the case with such gentle-souped women—and hath it off. I warrant me, well, there's no nobler but hath faith, but there; let that pass. Tell me more o' Hammet! did they rub him and give him a hot posset?"

"Yea, that they did. They put him in my mother's bed, and oh! thou canst not think how bruised and sore his poor body was. My mother and my grandam were weeping at the sight."

"How came it so—did the lad fall?"

"Nay, no, 'twas like this. That Saturday afternoon he and Silver had gone out Charleot way and had rested there by the river in such a lonesome place, it maketh me all shivery just to go by it in the sunshine, for 'tis ever so dark and quiet there. Hammet had a letter from my father, which good Master Page had brought from Oxford, where my father had given it to his brother, and while my sweet brother was e'en reading o' it, a cruel big dog set upon him from behind, beating him and wounding Silver full sore. Then, when he had done his wicked will, he went away and for a long time Hammet knew naught—'twas if he were asleep."

"Ah, poor heart! Now a sound—afore heaven, a sound!"

"Ay, so my mother saith. When he awoke, why he needs must find Silver but 'twas so dark he could scarce see 's hand before 's face, and for the rain had come on, so he called, and then Silver came answer, but faintly, too. Whereupon Hammet crept him to the poor beast and tended him as best he could and helped him to his feet, but Silver, could not step, the pain was grievous and he had been weak, too, for that his wound had had so much rain. Then my sweet boy took him in 's arms and bore him—may, thou knowest how big the dog is—a little way deeper into the thicket, and there they lay them down together, sheltered from the storm. Hammet would not leave him, so they waited all through the night for the morning, and then came they home— but slowly—very slowly."

"Now a piteous tale—a passing piteous tale! Oh, my poor lad! And all night say at thou—Saturday night?"

"Nay, 'twas a naughty night! Well do I remember how, said to Gillian, as we harkened to the drip-drip o' the rain and the roaring of the wind; 'There he will work about and I'd not let my dearest boy stay w' out for a king's ransom. And my little lad, the wild beast, white f' the woods w' the wild beasts. Nay, I could have found it in my heart to give them shelter, too, though peradventure 'twould had been a sensible thing to do, for they might had turned and runned me. But my pretty boy, alas! he hath caught his death. Now, what 'ellion was't that handled him so respectfully? 'Tere's best the Master Duffell were told that he might catch the catiff wretch. How is he called?"

"'Twas Deacon Hobday," Judith answered, "but think not Hammet told o' a free will. When my mother and grandam did question him he said: 'Let be, methinks Silver will mend and so let be. As for this threshing, why I care not—thou see'st I'd broke my care not—may, seek not to know, I'll not tell his name.' So he would say, but afterwards when he had gone to sleep, why then—the queerest thing I—he began to thrash about with 's arms and talked so strange. Now, 'twas o' Ned 'twas Deacon, and amon' he'd call father, and pray him not to look sorrowfully. Once he started up in bed, and cried: 'Deacon Hobday, thou shalt not touch my dog, he's mine an' thou wilt spare him.' So then we knew, and my grandam was exceeding wroth, and he went out w' a big stick in 's hand, but it came to naught—Deacon Hobday was nowhere to be found."

"And all the while my mother and grandam sat above w' Hammet, and anon he fell into a deep sleep. But he would not let me in that day, but in the next morn' he got up in the room, and—"

"Nay, I never saw Hammet fairer—his cheeks were as red as any rose, and his eyes so bright—verily they were like the stars. But how they looked at me, 'twas as if they did not see me. So I just stopped without and watched. My grandam was there at the side of the bed, and ever and anon she'd sop his face w' some cool, sweet-smelling water—"

"Ay, ay, of course, the woman hath some inward touch o' sense! Belike 'twas a diffusion o' chamomile flowers, for that is good to wash the head and comfort the brain."

"I wot not truly, but soon he went off to sleep, and when he waked again, though his cheeks were still red, his eyes had a different look, and he smiled, but he could not, so then, all of a sudden, he fell a-weeping."

"And grandam said:—"

"Nay, what's ailed thee, twill all be right. Where dost thou wilt thee, sweet?"

"And he made answer, though slowly too:—"

"'Tis but a little pain, I mind it no more than a bee's sting, but yet it yearneth me that I cannot go to Silver. His case is worse than mine, for I can speak, while he—whereupon he did sob and sob."

"Then my grandam went to the stair head and called down a few words to my grandfather, and in another moment—what think'st thou? He came up the stairs bearing Silver in 's arms. And when he got to the room he set him on the floor, and Silver walked in—but oh, so lame—over to the bed, where Hammet was much pleased, for all the while he was crying. Then did my grandfather kneel him down and unbind Silver's shoulder and lay fresh ointment upon it. I know what 'twas—'twas compounded o' hyssop."

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