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WILL SHAKESPEARE'S LITTLE LAD

BY IMOGEN CLARK

CHAPTER XV

O Conspiracy!
Sham'st thou to show thy dangerous brow by night,
When evils are most free? O, then, by day
Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough
To mask thy monstrous visage?

JULIUS CAESAR.

If hearty sorrow
Be a sufficient ransom for offence,
I tender it here: I do as truly suffer
As e'er I did commit.

TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA.

It was growing late and the candle was burning low, though Mistress Mary Shakespeare had still a number of last stitches to set in Ned's new turned doublet. Her daughter-in-law, from a near-by seat, watched the slender fingers draw the thread in and out, surely, for all that they trembled occasionally, and sought to divert the mother's anxious heart with gentle gossip. The men-folk were away at the Swan, for Will Shakespeare would not hear of going there that last night save in his father's company, and so had over-ruled the old man's opposition and had borne him thither in triumph to meet their friends and neighbours.

Above-stairs the little girls were fast asleep in their room, and in the loft over their heads Ned moved noiselessly to and fro as he busied himself with taking the neatly folded articles from the chest his mother had fondly packed that day and which was going by carrier's cart to London. He was not minded to go to bed, for in truth he was far from sleepy, but he was in no mood for companionship of any sort. Despite the fact that his cherished dream was shortly to be realized, his heart was uncomfortably near his throat. He was already experiencing his first taste of homesickness before ever he had left his home. He had bade all his friends farewell, and though he knew they envied him his good fortune, he had a dozen minds to change it with them. Not that he regretted leaving them overmuch; it was the parting on the morrow from his own home-people that cast its shadow over the warm-natured, simple fellow and filled him with a vague uneasiness. By and by, when he had conquered the feeling, he meant to steal down to the street and sally forth. Perhaps he might find some of his mates at the Swan listening to the talk of the elders, and a game of shove-groat would do much to dispel his sadness.

Meanwhile he bent over the chest and took out his few belongings and arranged them differently, whistling softly over his self-appointed task and trying by that means to call back his man's spirit. Several times he glanced around at the bed which Hamnet was wont to share with him, but the little fellow was not there. Edmund strongly suspected that he had stolen away and was, even then, standing without the Swan, bending close to the red-lattice in order to catch the sound of a certain voice within raised in some goodly tale. Of a truth, Ned had no wish to play the master and send the little lad home. Let him stay there an he would! Why, even the women below-stairs would wink at the boy's wrong-doing, could they but guess it, knowing why he waited and what the passing moments meant to him. The youth's heart was full of an unusual tenderness for his nephew, and though he was never one to weigh his own thoughts nor to give much importance to them, he could not but think how he should feel were he in the child's stead, and sympathy sharpened his perceptions.

Hamnet, however, was not in Bridge Street, nor had he had any intention of going thither. Lingering near taverns and ale-house had been prohibited and the lad had no mind to violate even the least of his father's commands. He was hiding in a far corner of the dark attic, fighting with himself, and with the wish that grew ever stronger within him to withhold the message altogether from Ned. And yet, insistent as that longing was, he felt that it was too late to admit any scruples of regret into his consideration; they should have been thought of before he had voluntarily joined in the conspiracy against his uncle's happiness. Say he forgave Ned everything, the blow to Silver, the cruel words uttered in the garden, the crueller words which Diccon had repeated and even the way he meant to oust him, Hamnet from his rightful place in his father's heart, say he forgave all that, forgot all that. What still remained? A boy's promise — a boy's word—something which could not be lightly broken, something which must stand as steady and true as the Queen's oath.

The suffering little soul was full of agony as the warfare within his breast went on without cessation. Which was right, which was right — he asked himself again and again —to keep his word, or to save Ned? They could not both be right. Which course should he follow? On the instant there came to him a phrase his father had uttered: 'Let it never be said o' my little lad that he is a promise-breaker.'

Like a drowning man catching at a straw the boy caught at this remembrance now and turned it into an argument for his own conduct. In the absence of any guidance he must act upon his advice and keep his honor unsullied. It was the flimsiest kind of reasoning, but the child, troubled and distraught, hesitated no longer. His hand sought the paper in his bosom and drew it forth, twisting it noiselessly into the form of a ball; the next moment it whizzed into the room past the kneeling youth and fell just before him into the open chest.

Ned, startled from his reverie, looked around quickly, half expecting to see his nephew or some friend who had stolen softly up the stair to surprise him at his work, but there was no one in sight and the silence all about was unbroken. He laughed outright at his folly, and yet, surely, there had been something to disturb him — some sound —some— His wandering glance rested on the crumpled wad which, partially opened by its fall, was lying upon his clothes. So, he had been asleep after all and this thing had waked him; somebody had crawled up to leave the message and had gone as quietly; he did not puzzle himself to guess the person's identity, but opened the paper eagerly and held it to the light. There were only a few words scribbled in a hasty hand, unknown, yet still with a strange hint of familiarity in some of the letters.

"Marry," he cried, half aloud, "I'm bidden to Sanctity Lane near the sally-piece by nine o' the clock to learn summat o' import before I go to London, and the mad wag who hath writ this hath put no mark nor sign to let me know who he is withal. Ha—ha, Phil Rogers, 'tis thy hand I swear, thou canst not trick me, my sweet rogue. Now what wild sport art up to, eh? I' faith I will not go—i' faith I will, though! My very last night in Stratford town I'll e'en be one wi' the lads i' their pranks. 'Twill help to do away wi' this heaviness, I warrant me."

He scrambled up from the side of the chest leaving the clothes strewn in disorder on the floor and extinguished the candle, then he stumbled down the stairs. Hamnet drew back into the deeper gloom as his uncle hurried by; the next moment he crept cautiously after him.

The living-room was deserted, for the two women had stepped over to neighbor Quincey's for a brief word with his good wife, and Ned just paused long enough on its threshold to cast a glance at the clock whose hands pointed to past the hour, before he hastened into the street and plunged forward whistling gayly.

The summer night was dusky but not dark; there was no moon, and the stars had a faint, far-away shining about their splendour as if they had little love for the earth and what went on there. A soft, white mist had risen from the river and floated between the trees and bushes like a filmy veil which lent an air of remoteness to their familiar shapes. Hamnet crawled into the shadow of the garden-wall and peered into the street, following with eyes which almost refused to do their office the tall, well-knit figure moving ever on into the gloom. How quickly Ned went, almost as if he had wings. Would nothing stay him—could nothing stay him? The little lad shivered in sudden apprehension as the answer to that unspoken question flashed into his mind. Ay, go thy ways, Ned Shakespeare, an thou tread'st never so lightly, and whistl'st never so sweetly, there's somewhat waiting for thee in Sanctity Lane that shall cry halt to those brisk steps and peace to that merry tune.

Hamnet ran out into the centre of the street. He had kept his word—his honor was white—and yet the greatness of the wrong he had just committed overwhelmed him with a terrible feeling of horror. How could he bear to defeat Ned's hopes, how could he bear to have him suffer? For suffer he would, and that most fearfully; his captors would know no mercy. Words of warning, words of love and tenderness leaped to the child's lips, and he was powerless to utter the least of them. He stood there speechless, looking, listening, trying, with all his might to call, but the shout was the veriest whisper, and he could only murmur with sobbing breath:

"Ned, Ned come back, I cry thee pardon, come back!"

And Ned, speeding on, heard naught.

Hamnet remained in the same spot like one turned to stone, while the whistle grew faint and fainter. How long he stood there tongue-tied, helpless, he never knew. It seemed ages to him; in reality it was but a few minutes, though each one in passing lengthened itself out indefinitely to his tortured mind: and still he was incapable of moving—incapable of thinking even. Suddenly a thought pierced its way to his benumbed brain—he must save Ned! In a second, as if a door had been set wide, there followed a host of rushing, half-formed ideas; he must overtake him, reach the appointed place before him, help him in what fray there was, come off victorious, or be borne away, too, down-stream without another word from father. He could not hold back now.

He darted swiftly on over the way Ned had travelled, but though he ran his fleetest, he could catch no glimpse of the figure he sought, nor hear no least sound that would indicate his presence. It was just possible that the youth had paused at one of the taverns to see if any of his friends were there who would bear him company, but Hamnet could not tarry in his turn. The town was very still. The houses he passed were, for the most part, dark and quiet, though here and there a lighted casement flung a patch of brightness out over the ground. An occasional burst of jollity issued faintly through the red-latticed screens of the ale-houses lying along the way, and in the distance, moving along slowly, he caught the glimmer of the horn-lantern carried by the watch. He slipped more into the shadow and sped on warily. 'Twould be a sorry thing to have a watch clap a detaining hand upon his shoulder and walk him off to the Town Cage, or to the stocks. The little lad had a vague notion of the swiftness of justice; he knew something of the strictness of the law which required that all apprentices and servants, found in the streets after 9 o'clock, should be summarily dealt with, and he felt that the same treatment would be meted out to any and every straggler.

It occurred to him on the moment that Ned, wishing to avoid the watch, had taken the other road, which was longer, but which was rarely used after dark and so escaped vigilance except of the most transitory nature. The thought put new force into his flying feet; he dashed forward, his heart beating in his ears like a smith's hammer, his breath coming in great gasps. So running, he came at last to Sanctity Lane, and turning away from the church with its brooding air of peace, he started up toward the willow plantation.

There was no one stirring in the length and breath of the lane but himself; the stillness round about was so deep that it filled the boy with an overwhelming sense of fear. Suddenly it was broken by a succession of loud, uncanny cries, Some of the Trinity rooks—those same rooks that were so monstrously well-behaved o' Sundays, and were ever setting an example of quietness to the lads—cawed right lustily among the trees, and one of them whirred with a tremendous fluttering of his wings into the air, and circled above his nest before swooping down again, his clamour dying away into a silence which was all the more awful for the lack of the strident noise.

Hamnet felt the earth totter beneath his feet. He was too late! What was to happen in Sanctity Lane had happened, and only the rooks were the wiser. He took a step forward with a faint gasp of horror, and just then from the distance on his left there came a sound that made his brain reel. He paused and raised his head, straining his ears to listen. The sound came a little nearer—he could not mistake it—he—it—His heart leaped for very joy! It was Ned's whistle—he'd swear to it anywhere; no one in all the world could whistle 'Green Sleeves' like Ned! Now, God be praised! he was still in time.

With a great bound he reached the low line of underbrush that formed a hedge at one side of the way; there he halted and gave vent to two soft, shrill notes; he paused and counted three (how could he bear to pause even for that brief space when that merry music was coming ever nearer?)—he repeated the notes and then, while the cuckoo's call was still vibrating on the air, he called out sharply: "London!"

There was a long moment of silence—of suspense—before a gruff voice almost at his elbow answered: "Father."

"Quick," Hamnet cried, "away wi' ye! This work may not be done tonight nor any other time."

"Thou'st played us false," Diccon hissed, "but an thine uncle gets off wi' a whole skin the same shall not be said o' thee."

Hamnet sprang beyond the reach of the extended arm. The rippling melody of 'Green Sleeves' was growing each instant more distinct—but hark! from that other direction there came the murmur of voices and look—look—a gleam of light, like some little heaven-born star drooping low to earth.

"Thou shalt reckon wi' me as thou wilt anon," he whispered, "but get thee gone now. Canst thou not hear the watch? Nay, I speak the very truth—see for thyself."

"The watch! the watch?" Wat Cawdrey cried, "I'll na be caught here and set i' the stocks for three days running for all the Ned Shakespeares i' the world. Let go thy hold, Diccon Hobday, thou shalt na be off first."

There was a hurried scuffle in the bushes, and the next instant three dark figures fled out of the cover. Hamnet caught a glimpse of them as they scurried across a bit of open before they gained the shadow of the thicket beyond. At that moment a group of men, one of them swinging a lantern, turned from Bull Lane into Sanctity. It was not the watch, however, but merely a few neighbors returning late from some pastime, though the boy, supposing them to be the guardians of the peace, had given the alarm in good faith. As they neared his hiding-place in the underbrush, where he had hastily concealed himself, he recognized from snatches of their conversation that they were Puritans, who had met in all likelihood at the other end of the town to worship with their fellows, and were even then separating for the night. He could hear their pious utterances as they commended one another to the Lord's keeping. They passed close to the little lad, not noticing him, nor did they pay any heed to the merry whistler who sped now in full sight diagonally across the open lands to the lane itself, thinking him, doubtless, some roisterer who had taken more than his fill of ale, and with whom it were well to have naught to do. They raised their voices in a solemn hymn to drown the gay, ungodly tune and so, singing, they went their different ways.

As Ned reached the bushes Hamnet rushed out upon him. He had formed no clear idea in his mind of what he should say or do. To him his uncle was only safe for the moment. Diccon and his companions had retreated but a short distance, and if they were hiding in the woods they might return as soon as the Puritans were out of hearing; they would recognize them as readily from their speech as he had done. He caught the young fellow's arm in his trembling hands.

"Get hence, Ned, get hence," he whispered, "'twas I that brought thee hither. Nay, tarry not an instant; there's grievous harm hard by."

"Thou, Hamnet, what mak'st thou here? thou, little lad—"

"Ay, no one else," the boy sobbed, trying to push the youth with a strength which on the sudden has grown of no avail. "Look not so sorrowfully—look angerly—chide me— I would have stayed thy going wi' father, and so I took counsel o' them that would help me."

Ned shook himself free from the hold of the clinging figure, stung by his nephew's admission. As far as he himself was concerned, he had no fear of any foes, but for this self-confessed one of his household—this one who had been a traitor—he could find no outlet for his scorn.

"'Tis a pity," he sneered, after a moment, "that thy heart should fail thee, thou unworthiest villian, thou that canst be steadfast to no single thing!"

"Upbraid me an thou wilt, I deserve no less," Hamnet interrupted, "but tarry not, tarry not, else will they come back. I would not have thee stayed—I sent them off—I said the watch was nigh."

His fast-coming sobs almost choked back the rushing words. "Oh! at the last I wanted thee to go wi' father—i' faith I did—i' faith I do—'Twas only that I'd given my promise when I was wroth wi' thee—I cry thee pardon —I—Oh! get thee hence—I—"

Something in the tired, gasping voice found its way to Ned's heart and made him acutely conscious of many things besides his own angry feelings. In a second he realized what it had cost Hamnet to give up his revenge. The night run with its hidden, imaginary dangers, more awful to the child than any of the harsh certainties of day—dark though they might be—was nothing in comparison with the struggle which must have gone on in his breast. He seemed sore spent and the lifted, pleading face showed ghastly in the surrounding gloom. Compassion softened Ned's eyes; he put out his hand with a good-humored laugh.

"Nay, little lad," he said, "we'll bury all ill-will here, and so let's go home together. In sooth, thou'lt be roundly shent by thy mother and mine own an they do but see thee. Come! I'll save thee a rating for this last time, peradventure we may steal to bed wi'out their knowledge."

Hamnet caught the outstretched hand in his eager grasp and pressed his face against it, kissing it again and again and caring naught that his tears were falling fast. They were such happy tears—for were not Ned and he friends —was not Ned safe?

CHAPTER XVI

O, nature! what hadst thou to do in hell,
When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend
In mortal paradise of such sweet flesh?—
Was ever book containing such vile matter
So fairly bound? O, that deceit should dwell
In such a gorgeous palace!

ROMEO AND JULIET.

We do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

MERCHANT OF VENICE.

The night brought only troubled slumber to the little lad, black dreams from which he wakened with a start to sob and sob again softly to himself as he relived their terrors and then found peace and reassurance in the sound of Ted's contented breathing. It was a satisfaction, at such moments, simply to put out his hand and touch his uncle's arm, clinging to him gently as if his hold could save him in his unconsciousness from untold dangers. Waking or sleeping there was ever the fear that Diccon would in some way sweep down to his revenge and bear the unresisting youth off to that hut in the fields, there to keep him in hiding till time should be no more.

The first grey stirrings of dawn, creeping in through the chinks of the tiny window, looked into the wide opened hazel eyes, and at its glance some of the unreasoning alarm in the boy's breast was dispelled. It was day at last. He crawled out of bed noiselessly. Usually he slept on the inner side, but Ned had humoured his request the night before and had changed places with the little fellow, not knowing that the small figure was interposed as a barrier between him and the vague apprehensions conjured up by the child's fancy.

Hamnet tip-toed across the room to the corner where a little coffer stood in which he kept his choicest belongings; he knelt down at its side and turned the contents over impatiently until he found what he sought, then he took it to the light and inspected it closely. It was a fair-sized knife with a verse running along the blade—his father had given it to him at the New Year, and not a boy in the Grammar School had one half so fine. He had considered it too good for every day use; the Sheffield whittle —his grandfather's gift—was kept in constant service, but this one was only taken forth on especial occasions and then put back again with greatest care. He meant to use it always when he was a man! He fell to polishing it with his handkerchief breathing softly on the steel and watching the tiny blur cloud its brightness for one moment, only to vanish the next, and by its going cause a greater lustre than before. When mortal efforts could make it shine no fairer, he went over to the open chest where Ned's clothes lay in a tumbled mass and slipped it in, covering it carefully. Sometime in London town, a week hence belike, belike longer, Ned, tossing up his things, would come across the knife, and would guess on the instant how it had come there. He would know what hand had stowed it away, and his thoughts leaping back to Stratford would be thanks enough.

Swiftly as the next few hours went to the household in Henley Street, even the minutes seemed to drag intolerably to one of the inmates there. Hamnet could feel no real sense of security while Ned remained in Stratford. There might come some mischance at any time to hinder his departure, and should that happen—the boy's imagination reeled at thought of the worser evils lurking behind. He hovered about his uncle in a protecting way that was very pretty to see. To the elders, with one exception, there was nothing remarkable in this constant show of devotion; Susanna and Judith were as unremitting in their attentions. The near prospect of parting with a dearly loved friend and playmate, for that Ned had always been to the children, easily accounted for the manner in which they pressed close at his side with gentle words.

Will Shakespeare, however, quickly perceived the change in his little lad's face. Whatever misunderstanding there had been hitherto between the two boys it existed no longer. There was no animosity in Hamnet's glance that was apparent to the observant eyes; what was not so apparent was the reason for the excitement in the child's bearing, and the fluctuating colour in his cheeks. Still this was no time for idle conjecture — the moment that showed the father the triumphing of his son's better nature over his jealousy was too bright to be dimmed by any of his own vague fears. The lad had come bravely through the struggle unaided; it was only natural that it should have cost him something.

There was an additional fondness, too, in Ned's gaze whenever it was turned upon his nephew, and a touch of respect which had never been there before. The sobbing incoherent confession Hamnet had made the previous night had shown him, in part, the tortures the valiant little heart had endured. That there had been some plot afoot to set back his journey seemed improbable enough to the older boy, when the younger one refused persistently to reveal the names of the conspirators, and was loud in words of self-censure.

It never occurred to Ned for a moment to connect Diccon Hobday with the matter; none of the lads of good family and position in Stratford had aught to do with him; he was a notorious bully and idler, and one who was ever in mischief of some sort. It seemed as unlikely, therefore, that Hamnet should be associated with him in his evil practices as to say that Avon was sheer ice in the summer time. Diccon in reporting the fight which had taken place in the Warwick road the week before, had drawn largely upon his imagination for the reasons which occasioned it though the fact remained that there had been an encounter in which Ned Shakespeare had come off victor. When a lazy lout steals an old woman's savings, as Diccon Hobday had stolen Goody Baker's fevpence, they be sorry fists that will not treat such a rogue to the thing he so richly deserves, and had not been loath to give the cowardly thief a lesson. He had whipped in a fair fight, however, for he was no one to take even the meanest adversary at a disadvantage, but when last the dastardly fellow had crieold!' and had reluctantly given up money, Ned had gone on his way without bestowing another thought upon the wretch grovelling in the where he had spurned him.

The plot as Hamnet wheed it, now veiling and anon unveiling it, was shrouded in a mystery which Ned had a few days days longer home he would have sifted out to complete satisfaction. As things were, however, he was forced to let it remaining himself to disentangle in some future time, and then reward those hidden enemies of his with first; only for this enemy, who had jeopardized up his vengeance at the last, twas nothing but a heartwhole parson. One who, in his remorse, could take all the blame to himself, who uttered not a word of upbraiding and did not seek to extenuate his actions, was surely to be forgiven. Ned, after the first flash of anger in Sanctity Lane conscious of a tenderer affection for the little lad, and when, piteous tale ended, the child hung to him, sobbing: "Thou'lt not seek to cozen me from my place in fr's heart?" he had recognized his sings and had answered convincing:

"Nay, thou'rt mad think that—thou dost thy father and grievous wrong to hold such thou 'Twas some fiend told thee. Ashould do that thing may I be blasted ever!"

With the memory those words stirring in his breast the ring of the indignant voice sounding in his ears, it was no wonder that Hamnet should put Diccon's insinuations from him resolutely, and all his thoughts toward his uncle should be fair ones. Still, haunted as he by that strange dread of evil which on the morning light was powerless to banish, he wished Ned away.

Poor Ned! 'Twas a sorry figure he cut that morning at his untasted breakfast before him for how could a body eat when there was a lump the size of a pebble in his throat? Even the brave show of his attire set oddly upon him, and forgot so completely all the jaunty swagger with which he had sought himself but yesterday. He looked in every truth like the boy he was, not the man he would fain have all think him. And though he laughed right stoutly and talked much in a strength, unnatural voice, there was some False in what he said. However, the parents no one by to notice his sorry attempt at wit, and surely not his mother, the littlest thing did make her suspicious as 'twas indeed the case with all Stratford.

Suddenly a noise in the street without came as an interruption to the gay, inconsequent talk, and when they had hurried to the door, though they knew full well what the sight, there stood the two saddled steeds held by the grinning boy from the inn, whose face broadened at sight of Will Shakespeare, with whose generous he already had had some acquaintance. He ducked his head with a scraping bow, and looked out from under his shock of hair in open astonishment at the evidence of emotion about him.

"When you's be goin' to Lunnon," he said lately the day to his fellow-servant at the inn, "'tis summat to be proud on, I'd ha' thought the Shaxpers, here was goin' to they's own burying see they. Ned's face was the lean o' Trinity steeple and a smacked a's 'oman on her cheeks, an' she hung and a's neck an' at the last a had pick's two hands an set he loose. An' silly Shaxper's brows be drawed, an' said 'Come on!' an' wi' that, a s lad clombed him up behint an' so they lops off. I' fecks, thinks I, there be-no pence for I this morn, but 'twas sooner i' my pate when Wully put in 's horse and tossed I summat. hat think 'ee? 'Twas a shillin'! now, I wisht such fowkses went eve-ay to Lunnon. I ha' rather see a gr man set off nor a laughin' one, says-your grievin' man keepeth but a ha e on a's money, an' a shillin' looketh bigger nor a saxpence."

The Fellers from Henley Street joined mail gathering of horsemen already rode off sembled at the Swan, an to the their company, keeping well society, Ned had no desire for had tl then, and Will Shakespeare space use of lingering yet a short The the child who sat behind him, and a from his position, cast ever in ev a wary glance around, seeing to th ish some fancied resemblance fearing bushes in Sanctity Lane, and the at, despite the brightness of even morning, some harm might scion befall the fresh-faced, uncon so e th on his right. It would be throu or an arrow to come singing new the air and find its home in the the coloured jerkin, or to wing by close beneath the soft, dark curls so its at it might bite off the tip in look But the sun, mounting higher and down on a scene full of peace of b tity, with no faintest suspicion in abroad. From the group of men and occasional bursts of laughter A y scraps of conversation were bop back to the others on the breeze, A lman's axe, with a cheerful ring th note, sounded in the near-by the and a servant-lass, stepping across the fields, lifted her blithe in song.

There was little said by the three, sadness of an indefinite parting fell heavily upon their spirits. Presently Ned Shakespeare reined in horse and looked back for the glimpse of the distant town where it lay beyond the shimmering haze. After a few moments of thus musing, he straightened himself resolutely and faced again toward the London road winding farther and farther from home. A sense of the stern realities of life sharpened his young features; in that moment the curtain which, till then, had shrouded the threshold of his manhood was drawn aside, and he had taken a long farewell of his heedless, inconsequent boyhood. He rode quite near his brother. "I be going forward now," he said, simply, but with a new ring in his voice; "thou wilt want these last few minutes wi' Hamnet alone."

He bent swiftly and kissed the small white face.

"I would thou wert going in good sooth, little lad," he said, "but cheerly, true heart, I will not be long before thou'lt follow the way. Marry I would it were now."

Hamnet clung to the extended hand with all his might.

"And so do I," he cried in broken accents, "and so do I— Prithee send me a letter?"

"I' faith, I cannot say—ask me not, dear wag. I be but a poor scribe at anything o' the sort—but there! I'll adventure I'll try."

"And thou'lt keep a good watch on father—an he hath a pose, or quack, or any other ill thou'lt care for him?"

"Beshrew me else! Why that's Ned Shakespeare's chiefest business i' London—to be a help and comfort to his brother. Nay, now farewell."

The two hands fell apart and the next moment Ned galloped ahead with a fierce clatter, a little cloud of dust rising on either side of him and spreading out upon the cobwebbed grass along the way.

"Ned's a good lad," Will Shakespeare said half-aloud, then more to himself than to the boy, he continued, "I' faith I shall be glad to have him by me, 'twill seem like a bit o' home."

"I would have stayed his going," Hamnet murmured, faintly.

It was the veriest whisper, wrung from the child almost against his will. A refractory buckle in the strap engrossed the man's attention on the instant so that he did not perceive the note of anguish in the low voice, then he lifted his head.

"Wouldst thou? Marry, thou hast conquered thy wicked thought, my brave boy—my Hector. Thou wouldst not stay him now?"

"Nay—not now. I be glad for many reasons that he is gone, that he will be wi' thee, that 'tis his wish, but chiefest that he will be out o' harm's way."

"O' harm's way, say'st thou? Now I pray Heaven he fall not into harm's way. By my troth, there be many pitfalls in London life for a country lad, but he will be ever near me and I'll e'en guard him an I can."

"I would have stayed his going," the little voice repeated, monotonously.

"Yea, yea, but that is past, think not on it longer, my own true heart."

"The whistle thou heard'st yestreen was to remember me o' my promise."

Will Shakespeare jerked in his horse and turned to face the child. "What whistle—what promise?"

"Why, in the garden when Judith would have listen—she misliked it sore—oh thou know'st, surely, and Ned said 'twas a signal and it was even so."

There was a momentary pause which was filled by a shout of laughter from the horsemen in front, but faintly, too, for they had fared well forward. Hamnet caught his breath and went on unflinchingly.

"'Twas to remember me o' the message I was to—to trick him —why I can't tell thee — to — to keep him back."

"What! Shakespeare cried in a voice not a whit less than thine uncle—against his own brother?—Tell upon thee! Was that the business yester noon that kept thee from my side? Didst come from this base work to join us in our pleasure? Answer me—out with it—say but one word."

"Yea."

Again there was a pause, and again that note of merriment was borne back to them on the still air where they halted in the roadway beneath the arching trees that bent above them as a bird brood over her young. A dull knock in the boughs uttered its tender, plaintive song unconscious of the heart-break below.

Was a bitter moment to both man and child, such an one as alters the aspect of the world in an unforgettable flash. The boy was suffering in every nerve of his body, and the man, whose sympathies were ever with all that was unselfish, generous, and good, to whom honor—in the least, as in the greatest—was the light by which he was wont to live, experienced a sudden reaction of feeling at the revelation of guilt practised by one who was dear to him than life and fame. In years he could hear again the little boy's voice as it had been raised in song the afternoon before and he could still see the laughing face whose smiles had been the while masked those treacherous intentions. The baseness in the boy's heart was like the canker in the folded bud — unseen — unguessed — from the beauty without, which yet might spread to God alone knew whither.

Will Shakespeare put his hand before his eyes, his anger lost in a great, enveloping sorrow. In that brief space of time many of his brightest hopes had met their death.

"Let me know thy story," he said at last, pity in his voice and glance; "let me try to understand it that I may find some way to forgive thee."

Then there followed one of those miserable half-confidences in which the mists of misunderstanding do but gather the more closely. The little lad, in his compunction, kept back what would have justified his own conduct in part. He realized that by repeating what Diccon Hobday had said he might reinstate himself in his father's affection, but in so doing it would be at Ned's expense; and after one moment of temptation, he could not let Ned suffer. Surely it was enough to say that, jealous of his uncle's going to London, he had quarrelled with him, and knowing of some older lads who had a grudge against him, he had been willing to betray him into their hands. His halting, disconnected sentences only deepened the confusion and made his hopeless. Nothing was clear to the listening man save that the traitorous message had been writ and delivered by his own son; after which —fear of the results seizing upon the child—he had warned Ned in some fashion and so the evil had been averted.

"Who were thy helpers, thy masters, rather?" he demanded abruptly when the recital had come to an end, "for I cannot think that one o' thy years could devise so hellish a scheme."

"Nay, ask me not," Hamnet cried; "I've given my word not to tell."

"Then keep that much o' thine honor clean; I will not seek to know, but an thou ever loved'st me cut loose from their company. Get thee down."

The boy clung to the strong figure wildly.

"I pr'ythee let me ride as far as to the hill-top — as far as to yon bush even —"

"Nay, not another step—here we must part—get down."

"Thou'lt not leave me angerly—thou'lt pardon me and—and—thou'lt kiss me, dear father—sweet father—"

"Think'st thou this day is not a heavy one for me also?" Will Shakespeare asked with a broken voice, as he unloosened the small fingers and cast them from him. There! there! I pardon thee, little lad. Now Heaven forbid that I should hold my pardon back, only thou hast made my heart dark, thou who hast ever been its light. Nay, nay, I must kiss thee, sweet, I'll not go from thee in anger — but keep thy life clean, dear boy, and so make amends. Farewell."

He put the lad from him resolutely and galloped on without one backward glance; he could not trust himself to look again at the pitiful, tear-stained face; he would not see the little fellow come running after him to the hill's crest. He knew as well as though he had watched every step of that painful progress how the boy, blinded by his tears, would stumble on and on, and then would wait breathlessly for that last glimpse. He'd not turn back to wave his hand—even the withholding of that sign would be some slight punishment and the child deserved some punishment surely.

"I' faith," the man said bitterly to himself, "an we all got what we deserved, which one o' us would come off free?"

Just before him the road curved abruptly; a few yards farther on horse and rider would be lost to view. He was almost there—nay, he'd not look back, the boy must be made to suffer; he had reached the bend. Involuntarily his fingers twitched on the reins and the obedient steed paused. For one moment there was a mighty conflict in the man's breast, the next he turned in his saddle and waved his hand in a last farewell to the little figure above him. There was an answering signal in return, then the rider spurred forward. He was too far away to see the sudden joy that transfigured the child's face, as the sunlight breaking through the banks of clouds glorifies the storm-swept land, too far away to hear the faint cry, "I'll make amends, sweet father."

TO BE CONTINUED.

IF CHRIST WERE TO COME

Father Bernard Vaughan scored social evils in a sermon recently in Aberdeen in which, speaking on the text: "Seeing the City He wept over it," he asked if Our Lord came to a typical modern city would He not weep to see the terrible yawning chasm between the rich and the poor, a chasm too deep to be filled up, too wide to be bridged over? Would He not weep to see the gross and terrible inequalities, the poor without room to live and one in every five dying in the workhouse? Would He not weep if He passed into some of their counting-houses, crossed the counter of some of their shops, went into some of their factories and saw the well-to-do men grinding the faces of the poor and happy to toss them a sweated wage?

Again, if our Lord were to pass into so-called society, what would be His impression of the laziness and luxury, what would He feel about people who found the best hardly good enough for them; those who were defying the laws of nature and committing racial suicide; those who made so little of the marriage tie that they tried through the law to have the knot cut; what would He think of the falling birthrate and the rising divorce record? He would weep, weep, weep.—New York Freeman's Journal.

GOOD ADVICE

Never blaspheme, or utter vile words or unchaste in your language. Shun those who take delight therein. Such association is, morally speaking, detrimental to character. The impure—the blasphemer, lacks the refinement without which no man is a gentleman.—Denver Catholic Register.

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