

WILL SHAKESPEARE'S LITTLE LAD.

BY IMOGEN CLARE. CHAPTER VI.

To since the birth of Cain, the first male child, To him that did but yesterday expire, There was not such a gracious creature born.

To see inherited my very wishes And the building of my fancy.

"Twas on Saint George's day, then, two and thirty years ago, that thy dear father first saw the light," the gentle voice began, "and three days later, as is the custom here, he was christened at Trinity. 'Twas as pretty a morn as thou couldst wish to see, and summer-like too, for the spring had come early that year. The fields on both sides of the river were soft and green, and there were blossoms peeping up everywhere. The trees had most of them put forth their bravery, and the birds sang right cheerily amid the young leaves. I was singing too in my heart for joy of all the beauty in the world as I glanced over and anon from my open casement. I was above-stairs with the little one donning his flannel, and my sister, thy grand-aunt, Joyce, was e'en helping o' me. She had made a mantle for him, fair with fringe and brocade—a bearing-cloth fit for a squire's child—and when the time came for them to go, she wrapped it about his head and tiny shoulders, and it became him wondrously. Then she took him in her arms and bore him gently, but first she needs must go up the stairs a little way, as is always meet with a new-born child. And what think'st thou she did? 'Why,' quoth she, looking back at me with mischief in her eyes, 'a few steps up will bring him luck, I'll not mind the trouble o' going the whole flight for his dear sake, for from my heart I wish him honour and advancement.' So with a laugh she went up the stairs to the very top, and then, turning, she came down again, smiling softly to herself. And she brought him to my bedside for a farewell kiss, and saith she, when that she showed me his little peaceful face: 'No matter how high he climbeth, sweet sister mine, his love will always bring him back to thee.' Those were her very words! Peradventure there be some that fancy 'twas only a merry maid's fancy that caused their utterance, but I know better. I tell thee, those words so lightly spoken fell deep into my heart, and many's the time I've thought on them in these later years, and I know, I faith, 'twas no whimsey on her part, but 'twas an angel bade her speak them.

"Then she left me and went down to where thy grandfather was waiting, here in this very room, with our friends and kinsfolk, and they, with one accord, gathered about her to see the babe, some cautions like and others pushing and crowding; but marry, the manikin knew not fear. He just looked at them all with something like a smile in 's eyes, as though he wist well what their brave sallies meant. And after they had gazed their fill they formed into a little band and went through the door, and I, watching from my window above, saw them troop out into the sunshine and send their way down the lane. Soon they passed from my sight, but I could still follow them with my mind's eye, faring along by the Market Cross, on and on to Old Town; friends and relatives led the way, and then came my sister Alys carrying the christom, made o' fine-worsted linen, white as driven snow. Oh! 'twas a goodly company but fairest o' them all was the child in Joyce's arms, and full well she knew that too, for she stepped as proud as proud Master William. Clifton, who would e'en stand sponsor to my little son."

"And he it was that gave him six Apostle spoons and the gilt bowl yonder; thou must not leave them out, Gran."

"Nay, not I, though I heeded them not at the time, I trow; I'd only eyes and thoughts for the babe. Well, they all went along gay and merry—I could almost hear their laughter—until they reached the pleanched alley that leadeth to the church door; then their light talk ceased. The trees above their heads were fair with buds amid the bursting leaves, and here and there a white petal floated down, but they passed beneath them silently. Twice before had they been along that same path with a little child o' mine, and they needs must think o' those times. And to me waiting in my chamber, there came a thought that shadowed the brightness o' that bright day—a thought o' those other little ones whose loss had left my home so desolate, and my heart was heavy with the remembrance, for a mother always remembers!

"But they tarried not; they went on to the church, uttering no word, though mayhap many a prayer was whispered by them for the boy on my sister's breast, as they halted in the porch to let him enter first. In that way the christening party passed up the nave to where Sir John Breechbuckle stood waiting at the font. Though I did not think but the little one was not affrighted in the least by the strange face and the deep, gruff voice; nay, he fell no whimper. And at that Joyce felt her heart misgive her, as I did mine when that she told me, for thou knowest they say 'tis always a good sign in a child cry lustily at such times. But when she would have been dismayed a bar o' golden light came in through the window and touched his face, and the glory o' it stilled her fears. When 'twas all over, Sir John shook thy grandfather by the hand, and said the babe was a likely one and he hoped 'twould thrive, whereat thy grandfather thanked him for 's kind o'ice and bade him to the gossips' feast, and then they all came back to the house and had a cup o' merry-go-down and some o' the christening cake and a store o' all things fine."

"She broke off in her recital and looked down at the eager, upturned face. "All this thou know'st, little lad."

"Ay, marry that do I; but go on, come to the Plague."

"Hark to him now! The Plague, say'st thou? Ah, those were bitter days that followed; pray God they come

not again! The land was pleasant to see, but a grievous ill lay over Stratford town, and the green and gold fairness was but a mockery to the anxious hearts. 'Twas a summer o' smoke, as we knew it would be when the ash budded before the oak, and a great pestilence was all around. Scarcely a house was there that was not held in its deadly grasp and bore not the red cross upon its door above the words: 'Lord have mercy upon us!' writ in a trembling hand. 'Lord have mercy upon us!' How many times I said that over as I hugged my little babe close to my breast, and my heart grew faint at my thought that no matter howsoever tight I held him I could not keep him an 'twas not the Lord's will. All day long I stayed within doors—I dared not stir abroad—with the little fellow in my arms. I couldn't bear to have him from me a minute, and every hour he grew dearer and dearer, and every hour the fear o' losing him pressed closer. The air was heavy with soot, and the passing bell rang slow and solemn, each peal quivering on my heart-strings. Sometimes the little babe would stop his crowing and seem to listen to the fearsome sound. Then would I fall to kissing him and crying: 'Thou'lt not go sweet—thou'lt stay with mother?' And he would look at me e'en a moment as though he understood, and once he threw his tiny arm up on my neck as if he would not leave me.

"Nay, nay, lad, that lack o' trust was grievous wrong, and yet I could not help it. Twice had my arms been lightened o' their load and my heart sore burdened, and I could not let this man-child go. But God was good. He did not chasten me. Sure, there was some charm laid upon our threshold, for the Plague came not nigh us. The summer waned and still all Stratford suffered, and 'Lord have mercy upon us' was evermore the cry. The bell tolled by night and day, and the very voices grew hoarse with grief, but there came no harm to the little one that lay upon my heart. He grew apace, the finest, lustiest child I ever saw, with eyes like stars that even then took note o' all around. The woods about here turned to red and gold and still the Plague lingered and the people were wasted with despair. 'Twas winter before it really left us, and in that time—in that time, boy, a sixth of the Stratford folk were taken and the shadow o' sorrow lay on many hearthstones. She raised her apron to her eyes and wiped away the tears that had gathered there, then she went on speaking very tenderly.

"There was no shadow on mine, thank God! Only a great joy that had trembled so near the brink o' danger it had taught me how to feel for my neighbors in their woe. I wot not if 'twas because o' those dark times that my little William grew dearer to me than any o' my other children were, though I loved them and love them still with a true heart's love. But he must ever be first in my affection, for my heart-strings were bound so tightly around him.

"Well, lad, he was the sunshine o' the house, and he was happiest at my side, though he ever loved to ride on his father's shoulder, but even from there he would stretch out his arms to me to be taken and kissed and laughed over. He was the best and sweetest-tempered babe that ever lived, I warrant me. He cried but rarely, and when he did, marry 'twas not to bellow like most children; his little lip would quiver and the big tears would grow in 's eyes; sometimes they would fall, but oftentimes they'd disappear and he'd be smiling again. He was ever smiling, peradventure the fairies were whispering to him."

"Tell about the time he was lost."

"Ay, marry, sweeting, thou'lt have the whole loaf; thou'lt not be content with less. But to the tale. That was when he had just turned two in the June o' that year; 'twas on a Saturday and he and I were in this very room, he on the floor at my feet, e'en as thou art, when who should come to the door but my good gossip Mistress Quiney, and she and I fell deep in talk and paid no heed to the child. When she had gone I turned me to speak to the little one, and lo! he was not anywhere to be seen. On a sudden my heart was like a stone in my breast and my blood stood icy-cold in my veins. And 'Willy, Willy, sweet; I called, hoping to hear his merry laugh. But 'twas passing still; there was no sound abroad save the song o' the birds without in the garden, for the house-door stood open wide. Then I was dumb with fear. Methought the fairies had stolen him away, that 'twas they who had sent Mistress Quiney to lure me from my watch, and then they had spirited him to Fairyland. I ran out into the garden half-mazed with grief, and the sunlight blinded me so that I stumbled along the path, not knowing what I did nor whether I went, and then suddenly I saw a sight I shall never forget. There was Willy standing on the grass by the elder bush, gazing up at a bird that was singing on a spray, as if he knew its song. I ran close and the bird spread its wings and flew away; then Willy turned and toddled toward me and seized my gown, and laughed and laughed again. I did not rate him; instead I caught him in my arms and kissed the dimples in 's cheeks and the crosses in 's fat little neck, whereat he thrust the rose he had in 's hand into my face, and naught would content him but that I should take it myself and kiss it too."

"That was because he loved the daisy, Gran, and wanted thee to love it."

"In good sooth, yea. He loved the daisy, and often would I gather them for him and he would use them for his mamnets, but tenderly, too, as if he would not bruise them. All that summer, pleasant days we'd sit in the garden or go into the meadows by the river, and he would play with the little things he found there, or he'd listen with all his heart in 's face to the birds' songs. He loved them even then. And when he was forewarned with roving he'd nestle close beside me and I'd talk to him low and tell him little tales, or I'd sing the old carols and ballads to him, and though he was but a babe, he seemed to understand. Then I said to my heart: 'Peradventure my little child may grow to be a man whose dole it is to hear ten whole world.' Nay, then, we women

often dream fond dreams o' our little babes, and how each one holdeth, be- lie, some great gift that, as we but get ears, and could foster it with proper- ly, and could foster it with proper- ly. Only oftentimes we do naught! And so, when I felt this feeling growing and ever growing within me as I looked into my Willy's eyes, I did bethink me 'twas a sign sent from on high, and I resolved to learn from the books that I might teach my little son when he grew old enough to commence scholar. Thou know'st I'd never been to school—there were no dame schools at Wilmore when that I was a child—but I made shift to learn myself, and when Willy was three, though Baby Gilbert was in my arms, I used to give the little fellow lessons from the horn-book."

"The one I studied?"

"E'en so, the very same. First he counted the criss cross row and very soon he could make the letters, both small and big, and then 'twas no long time before he'd mastered the little words that go to 'Our Father' by heart. All that was done ere he was four years old, and he would have to reach the age o' seven before he could enter the gram- mar-school; so thy grandfather brought me home an Absey book and Willy learned the catechism and command- ments therefrom, and soon he'd all the reading-matter safely stowed in 's little brain. Learning came easier to him than to me. Many's the night I've sat up late studying by candle-light—and studying hard—what it didn't take him long to master. And besides the Absey book there was the 'Book o' Riddles' I had as a fairing, and there were some ballads printed by good Widow Toy and the Carols. I borrowed me some books, too, from Billesley Hall, and the lad and me did read them together. 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