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WILL SHAKESPEARE'S LITTLE LAD.

BY IMOGEN CLARK.

CHAPTER I.

They rose up early to observe
The rite of May.
A Midsummer Night's Dream.

There was an air of alertness about the little town of Stratford-on-Avon that May morning in the year of grace 1596, and the thirty-eighth of the reign of good Queen Bess, though usually at such an early hour it was taking its last delicious doze, utterly unmindful of the world and its manifold duties.

But who could really sleep the first of May, even if the sun had not yet risen? Not the old people, surely, whose slumbers are light enough at any time and who, with all the mysterious noises of the previous night sounding in their ears, lived over again in a half-drowsy state the days when they, too, went a-Maying. Not the middle-aged people, who had buckled on the armour of responsibility and had homes of their own to look after and children to care for, and so perforce must give up all those pleasing, foolish customs, though the spring breeze called wooingly to them and the early flowers beckoned with alluring fingers. Not the young people—Ah, no! There were no young people in Stratford, except the tiny, toddling things, and they were of small account as yet.

There was not a young person from ten to twenty years of age within the limits of the little town. The bells of Trinity had hardly ceased striking the midnight hour of the 30th of April, when shadowy figures of all sizes came from the houses lying in quiet lanes near the water-side, or in adjacent fields, and hastened to the market-place, the point of assembly, where the groups grew quickly. What laughter rang out upon the still, damp air—what shouts and songs! Tom Bardolph, the town-crier, jingled his bell from sheer joy, and called stridently to the stragglers whose forms could be seen from the steps of the Cross. The boys whistled and gave vent to their exuberant feelings in wild yells, while the older girls cried "Hush!" warningly, with little ripples of excited giggles drowning the severity of their tones. The river, slipping slowly past under the arches of Sir Hugh's great bridge, seemed suddenly to hold its breath in envy of all the delights the young folk were shortly to know in the silent woods where the flowers were already on tip-toe with expectancy.

Who could sleep at such a time? Who could sleep later, when, with the blowing of horns and the cry of the pipes that grew each moment faint and fainter, the band of young people left the town and hastened toward the shadowy forest? And, above all, who could sleep in that sudden silence which, as it settled down, throbbed with memories of other times to the stay-at-homes, though the river went on with its drowsy lullaby among the sedges and there was no other sound abroad?

So it was small wonder that long before sunrise the good people were astir. They were as eager as children to see what manner of day it would be. The robin had sung blithely the previous afternoon, chirping forth cheery promises of sunshine and clear skies. That was a sign that never failed them! But still the grey clouds lay close, guarding the secret of the morning, though already there was a thrill of color in the east, where the dawn was knocking to be let out.

After a short time that mysterious curtain stirred softly, and here, through an unguarded chink, and there through another, the young day peeped out at the world with a little golden light in her eyes, and then, grown bolder, she rent the enveloping folds asunder and leaped forth, all radiant, rosy smiles.

The river, that had been a moving thread of darkness but a moment before, flashed on a sudden like a slender Spanish rapier drawn from its sheath; the meadows along the banks grew distinct; and the little, plaster-walled, thatched-roof cottages of the town, that had been so many dim, blurred shapes, stood out boldly, while here and there a small tuft of blue smoke rose from the chimneys of the thriftier householders and mingled with the dissolving clouds, and under the wizard's touch the gardens, with their flowering hedges and their fruit-trees white with bloom, were revealed

The wooden spire of Trinity thrust its glittering tip into the glowing sky. It was the first thing to catch the light of the coming sun, which burst suddenly, wide-awake upon the scene. A white-throat in a near-by elm, as if he had been the only one watching for this radiance, lifted his voice in gladness, but his song was lost in the sounds that came from the woods.

Hark! a shrill, sweet cry—the call of the pipes, the lower notes of the tabour, and then a gay mingling of men's and women's voices throbbing with the lilt of the tune, and, rising above them all, the high, childish treble that carried the melody up—up into the blue. The distant sounds were borne townward by the rollicking little breeze which was soft and warm, and yet as wayward as a lad's will as it loitered along, dropping vague hints of all the wonderful doings out there.

In a moment doors were flung wide and windows unsnicked under impatient hands. The keynote of the day was struck in that burst of music which the little breeze obligingly halted to chronicle. It came nearer and nearer. Even the sober-minded Puritans, of whom there were not a few in Stratford town, felt a quickening of their pulse as the songs grew more distinct. They might maintain at other times that this Maying was an abomination—a godless sport, a pagan custom—and yet, with its sweet hurly-burly at their very doors, they could not but remember that their ancestors, nay, even some of them themselves, had gone forth in this same fashion to greet the May, returning, as these young people were doing, in the early morning with the treasures of the woods heaped high in their arms.

Some such remembrance thrilled in their blood despite themselves, and the corners of their grim mouths relaxed a trifle, while some even went so far as to half-sing the words of the song over beneath their breath. Only some of them, however; there were others who listened sourly, and, as they hurried out with the rest to meet the incoming procession, their voices were raised in loud denunciation and they threatened the dancers with lameness and broken legs, and saw no beauty whatever in the freshness of the day and the streets with their arches of flowers and vines.

Little, however, did the gay band, entering the town from the west, heed this grumbling, any more than one would feel disturbed by the buzzing of some discontented flies. The world was large enough to hold them all, and if these little black specks found fault with all the sweet bravery of spring and had no welcome for her, why, so much the worse for them that their eyes were holden to the beauty and that these rites seemed impious in their sight. There be many like them in every age, who, taking no enjoyment in the simple, sweet pleasures, and, indeed, reading their own crooked meaning therein, would away with them all. As if God can only be praised by long prayers and fasting, and sour, smileless faces. As if one does not know that He hath made the flowers and the singing birds and the sunshine, and that joy in them all and love and good-will to our kind are the best services we can render!

So, recking not of the adverse criticism about them, and seeing, indeed, only smiles upon the faces of the little crowd, the procession came proudly on, the men with the pipes and tabours leading the way, blowing and beating lustily. Back of them was a band of youths, their persons decked out with vines. Some of them had bound wreathes of flowers upon their brows, others had gay blossoms tucked in their caps, and all wore nosegays, large and small, slipped into their jerkins. They rested their hands on one another's shoulders, and stretched out across the roadway in two wavering, brilliant lines, as they danced forward from side to side, singing ever as they came. Next in order a group of flower-crowned maidens, with summer in their faces and in their light, buoyant steps, made the air sweet with their merry music. Their arms were laden with fragrant branches and shy blossoms, which ever and anon they cast about them.

And then, with the shouts of scampering, crowding children, came the chiefest jewel—that which they had all gone forth to seek and were bringing home with pride and veneration. The stay-at-home people pressed close to see, the men tossing their little ones up on their shoulders that they might have a better view. A yoke of oxen (good Master George Badger's old Sure and Steady; they'd been away on this same errand to fetch the May-pole in a round dozen of years; it was little marvel, then, that to them was given the first place in the drawing!) stepped slowly by, each conscious footfall full of majesty. Then followed another yoke, and still again a third, and so on until a half-score were numbered by the eager crowd. And what a transformation it was of the simple beasts—simple no longer, perdy! but tricked out with floating streamers and vines and with sweet nosegays tied on the tips of their horns. They were like the beasts of Fairyland, or those wondrous creatures on the painted cloths that used to adorn the walls of Charlecote House, before the owners turned Puritans and had them burned for popish reminders. And back of the last oxen was the rude, low platform set on wheels—especially made for this purpose—on which the giant of the forest lay supinely, stripped of all its branches, its wounds bound up with great bunches of flowers and herbs, with garlands of vines, and a hundred different floating ends of ribbons and cloth of various hues stretching from the top to the bottom. On either side of the cart walked a man holding in his hand a huge pronged stick, which, from time to time, he rested on the pole to keep it the better in its place; or anon he would shake it at the children to maintain some sort of order among them.

The crowd cheered stoutly as the long pole moved serenely by. Then, with much good-humoured elbowing and pushing, the people joined the throng of vine-laden devotees who were bringing up the rear, and so on and on, amidst a jangle of questions and answers and verses of song, the whole procession took its way, halting at last in Master Adrian Ford's meadow, near Cross Lane.

A score of men ran forward and closed about the cart. It was the work of a conjurer! In one moment the oxen were detached and led away; in another, strong hands were touching that fallen monarch with almost reverent tenderness. A boy, who had stood quietly by, now, at a sign from one of his elders, stepped proudly forward, and kneeling upon the ground, bound at the very top of the pole the banner of England—the Red Cross of Saint George then he moved back; and the band of men closed in again.

There was the sound of laughter and cries—quick commands—the place was cleared of people, then a tugging and straining went on among the men as the pole slipped into the hole prepared for it in the ground. It wavered uncertainly, as a ship will rock in the trough of the sea, but after a brief moment's space, it stood firm and straight, a right brave, beautiful thing with all its flowers and ribbons. There was an instant of quiet, almost of suspense, among the watching folk, and then in a trice that same rollicking little breeze which had already done such good service that morning, tugged, boy-like, at the end of the pennon, blowing at it mischievously, whereat it slipped away and bellying out, flaunted its undaunted splendour in the sunshine.

A sudden clapping of hands, like the crackling of a hungry fire, burst forth in one place and a great cheer sprang from assembled people, a cheer that spread even as the rings grow in the quiet waters at a stone's fall, until down in Old Town the chimes of Trinity answered merrily, and nearer the bell of the Holy Guild, in Chapel Lane, rang out right joyal peals of welcome. And high above the clamour of bells and fifes and tabours and the shrill blare of the trumpet came the cry as from one throat—the cry that so often had carried dismay and despair to England's foes in many a battle on sea and shore:

"Saint George for England — Saint George for Merrie England!"

CHAPTER II.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
As You Like It.

More matter for a May morning.
Twelfth Night.

Before the sun was three hours high Master Adrian Ford's meadow bore no slightest resemblance to its usual tranquil aspect. On the softly rising knoll at its upper end stood the flag-tipped pole, with its ribbons and streamers fluttering in the morning air, as much at home in its new surroundings as if it had always been there and was, indeed, not a creature of a day but for all time. At its foot the ground was strewn with birch boughs and divers other branches, while here and there about the field, as if sprung up by magic, were leafy bowers and rude vine-trimmed booths, the latter erected by the tradesmen who, having a goodly eye for business, had left their stalls and shops in Middle Row and meant to take advantage that day of the country folk who would come from far and wide to join in the May sports and see the Morris danced.

There was a daring rogue of a pedler already upon the ground, who scented the air with his upturned nose as he passed the merchants' wares, disdaining, in especial, the attractions of the baker's stall, where there was a store of sugar, biscuits and caraways, with all kinds of sweet suckers and comfits, laid out to tempt the appetite, and whither, even thus early, the small boys were pushing and jostling as they eyed each coveted dainty with longing looks. At one side of the booth the smiling proprietor stood, crying in his thick, suety voice:

"Walk up, roll up, tumble up, come up any way you can—here's cates to buy!"

The pedler gave the place a wide berth; he was getting in tune, too, for the day's work, and began to enumerate the contents of his pack with lungs which put the baker's vocal powers to shame:

"Ribbons, gloves, Sheffield whittles, women's gear and rings wi' posies, ballads, shoe ties, table-books—come buy o' me! Who'll buy—who'll buy?"

He would keep it up all day and at the end, he would go away with an empty pack and a full purse, for he was a merry-hearted wag with a tongue in his head that would draw kindness from a stone, one who, in truth, was well known in Stratford and all the country round at fairs and wakes and greatly liked by the women, the maids especially. No fear that he'd let Ned or Diccon slip by without getting a fairing from his wares, and oh! the treasures he could disclose, and what an eye he had for a pretty face, and what a voice to sing you a song now!

Already, too, though it was far too early, the Morris dancers had gathered beneath the trees, taking their turn at a game of loggats. Robin Hood and Little John, in their tunics of Kendal green, with the bells about their ankles making a swift keen music as they moved, had laid aside their bows as they matched their skill with the sticks, while the country bumpkins stood at a little distance gazing open-mouthed at the sport, or stealing furtive glances at Maid Marian, the Lady of the May, and marvelling among themselves that despite her golden crown and her long robes, she should play at penny-prick with Friar Tuck, and beat him at it, too. She was a pretty wench and fair to see in that wonderful yellow gown, though their elder sisters could have told them that 'twas only Dame Turpin's cast kirtle after all, and, if they looked closer, they would know that Maid Marian was but young Peter Turf, he that lived at Dancing Marston and had run away from home this two years back.

The people came thronging in from all sides, and many of those who had been Maying in the earlier morning quitted the field now, hastening to their homes to refresh themselves with food and drink and to trim their own houses with the forest's spoils before returning for the sports, which would continue till the sun went down.

Three children—two girls and a boy—detached themselves from the noisy group in front of the May-pole and hurried across the meadows and through the little straggling lanes, their arms weighted with flowery branches. The girls who were somewhat in advance, were dressed alike, in full kirtles of murrey-coloured homespun reaching almost to the ground, their jackets laced over white smocks. The short grey cloaks which both of them wore, were pushed back over their shoulders, on account of the increasing warmth of the day and because 'twas the easiest fashion of carrying them. The oldest girl was about thirteen years of age, while her companion was two years her junior. Both children had fair hair, the little one's escaping beneath her white coif in wayward, wind-tossed ringlets the color of corn silk while her eyes gleamed from out the soft tangle as blue as the speedwell she carried in her warm little fist. She had a gentle, confiding way about her.

"I' faith, Sue," she said, half smothering a sigh. "I wish I might borrow me yon bird's wings, for I be forewearied and can go no faster than this snail's pace, and I would be at home with a bowl full of porridge before me."

"I warrant thee it wouldn't stay full long the other laughed; "there's naught like being out in the woods for hours to make a person hungry. But see Hamnet now, what a laggard he is! One would think he'd never a thought o' porridge, or o' aught else save the sky and his dreamings, and yet, once we're set down, he'll eat more than the two o' us. 'Tis ever thus with men and boys; my Grandam Hathaway saith they have tremendous appetites——"

"Good Mistress Sadler told me 'tis because a man must feed his brains and muscles, and a girl, now she hath only her body to care for."

"Marry and amen! I be glad Mistress Sadler is no godmother o' mine. Have we not brains as well? I think there is no question o' a boy's brains when there's food set before him. He eats so much for that he's greedier than we are, and that's the truth. Feed his brains, forsooth! Believe no such foolishness, Judith sweet. My father's brains are better than good master Sadler's, and he hath more of them too, but he's no such big eater as Master Sadler is. Dost remember last Michaelmas when father was here and the Sadlers came to dinner? I warrant thee, father ate not so much o' the goose as Hamnet's godfather did, and he'd more excuse, with all his brains to feed. Nay, nay, that's foolish gossips' talk, though I be but a child—and a girl into the bargain—to say it."

"I care not for my part, Sue, why a boy should eat more, so that I always have enow. I know one thing though; and we were starving now and there was but a crust o' bread between us three. Hamnet would give up his share to us, though his muscles and brains cried out for the feeding."

"Ay, that he would, and though we would protest, yet would he find some good reason to make us do his will. And I marvel why that should be."

"Methinks any man would do the same. Even Master Sadler, though he be overfond o' eating, would give up all for my dear godmother's sake."

"I cannot say. He might do so an Mistress Sadler were in sore need; but every day, I think not—I think not. He'd as lief she had the wing o' the goose, so that he still got the major portion."

"Nay, Susanna, what would our father say?"

"Our father would say—troth! I know not. But methinks, though he might chide me for letting my tongue wag thus, he would smile in that way o' his that robs his words o' any sting, and mayhap he will make a little note in that great mind o' his o' good Master Sadler's excellence and his mighty fondness for eating and sack, and see how he could turn it into his writings some day."

"Doth he always so? I shall be afeared to speak or sing when he is by."

"There is naught to fear; he looks on only in kindness; he is so gentle for all he is so strong and tall, and knoweth so much. But he is ever learning and everything teacheth him—the birds and the flowers, and the way the trees blow in the wind, and—everything. Why, even you and me are not too small. That is how his brain is fed, in that manner and with reading, and not with stupid goose and gravy, but—"

"There's mother now," Judith interrupted, "and grandam too; they're watching for us. Methinks my Grandmother Shakespeare hath the sweetest face in all the world. I'll race thee to the house, Sue, and beat thee, else thou may'st have my new handkercher, the one set about wi' Coventry blue."

"Keep thy handkercher," a scornful voice exclaimed, near them; "girls don't know how to run."

"Fie! fie!" the sisters cried in a breath, their words unheeded by the slim figure darting past. Judith put out a detaining hand, but she only grasped a bit of branch from the store the boy carried, and even that would not stay with her, it flew back with a snap, leaving a few, half opened buds in her fingers. The next moment she started in pursuit of her brother, and Susanna, after a short struggle with her dignity—she was growing tall and had put away many childish things—joined also in the race. The disdainful gibe was like a lash to spur her on, but despite her fleetness she was no match for those flying feet that seemed to spurn all obstacles in the way, though she easily outdistanced Judith. It was a foregone conclusion that the boy should win.

"Give ye good-day," he cried as he reached the two women who had been interested onlookers of the race. "Saw ye ever such beautiful blooms? I knew just where to find them—I've been watching for weeks, and I showed the girls. Oh! we've had rare sport. I warrant ye there was never such a Maying before." He broke off as his sister came panting up, with a little nod of satisfaction.

"Said I not true, Judith?" he asked slyly.

"About running—girls can't run."

"'Twas not a fair race, was it, sweet Mother? He'd a goodish start, and besides he frighted us as he ran by."

"I outran thee once in Shottery Lane," Susanna cried, triumphantly.

"Thou'lt never forget that," Hamnet laughed; "'twas ages agone. Let's try again, fair and square—thou couldst not beat me to-day."

"Nay, I could not do it to day, forsooth, because—because there are the May sports to see."

"To-morrow, then?"

"To-morrow will be a busy day, will it not, dear Mother? I could beat him to-morrow, were it not that there's baking to do; and then there's father's cloak to unpick, that it may be made over into a doubtlet for thee, Master Hamnet."

"The next day?"

"The next day Susanna might easily outrun thee, sirrah," interposed the elder Mistress Shakespeare, with a laugh, "were it not that she hath promised to help me with my knitting. One victory will have to content her."

"Ay, that it will," the boy returned, good-humoredly, "for 'tis the only one she'll ever get, as ye all know, though your words be so brave. Harp away, Sue, about that time; I give thee leave. Thou'lt still be talking o' it when thou art old and grey."

"Thou'rt late in coming home; we looked for thee an hour agone."

"We could come no sooner, Mother sweet, there was so much to do and see."

"But the pole hath been up this long while now."

"Ay, in sooth it hath; and who dost think placed the banner at its very top? Nay, then, thou'lt never guess. 'Twas me—me—me! I knew thou wouldst be mazed, and my sweet grandam too; but this is how it happened. It fell this year by lot to Thomas Getley to put the flag in place, and 'tis the third time running that he hath had the office, and he careth not overmuch for the honor, save that 'tis kept from the other men. When we were in the woods this morn and the pole had been fixed fair with ribbons, I heard him talking with his mates and giving himself airs like the London gallants that come sometimes to Clopton House. And, saith he, with a shrug, like this, 'twas not such a fine thing to do as they thought, and for his part he'd as lief any boy would have the chance. Why then, Gran, I walked straight up to him and said I'd take him at his word. At that they all laughed, but I would not budge, though the cries sent little hot pricks into my skin, and he was mightily flustered.

"'Why dost thou want to do this thing?' he asked, speaking out right boldly; 'no boy hath ever set the flag.'

"Then I answered him in few words:

"'And that is why I want to do it.'

"At which he laughed, too, and saith he:

"'Perhaps thou hast another and a better reason to serve thee, sith methinks 'twould never do to overthrow old customs just for a lad's desire.'

"'Ay, that I have,' I cried, 'and the best o' reasons, too. 'Tis the Cross o' Saint George I want to raise, and it meaneth more to me than it can to thee, for my father was born on Saint George's day.'

"Then he peered at me close.

"'Why,' quoth he, "'tis Will Shakespeare's little lad. Nay then, thou shalt have my place, for his sake and thine own. What say ye, friends, shall we not let the old custom slip?'

"And all the men shouted 'Ay!' right lustily, and one o' them set this wreath upon my head. And Mother—Gran—when we were come to Master Ford's field my heart was going as loud as old Pimpernel's tabour, and my hands shook. I was afeard I might not bind the banner safe and there'd be some mishap, and then sore coil for Thomas Getley and the others. But when I stepped out at the sign they made me I wasn't affrighted in the least. I knelt and tied it, knots and double knots—'twill only come down when the pole doth—and then, still kneeling, I bent my head and kissed its folds softly. 'Fly wide, little kiss,' I whispered; 'fly as far as London town; the breeze will bear thee safe to father.'"

"Thou art a pretty phrasemonger, in sooth," his mother interrupted, with a fond laugh, "and full o' conceits too. 'Tis a good thing, verily, to remember thy father. I doubt not he'll be thinking o' us all this day and wishing he was here."

"'A branch of May I bring to you,
Before your door it stands.'"

sang Judith in her shrill, sweet voice as she danced to and fro with her pretty skipping steps and low courtesies.

The others stopped in their light talk to watch the figure of the little maid darting up and down the soft, green sward. Susanna and her mother stood together at one side. They were very like. The woman had only to glance at the girl's fair face to recall 'the lovely April of her prime,' though the rose was still faintly growing in her own cheeks, and her fading hair, in the bright sunlight, took on some of its old time sheen. Hamnet was near his grandmother, as was ever the way when the two were of the same company. By a power stronger than that the magnet wields they were always drawn close to each other. Her arm was thrown fondly about his shoulder, and his head, with its curling auburn hair, was cast back against the spotless kerchief that was folded across her bosom. His frank face, with the dreamy hazel eyes set wide apart, was turned in admiration toward his twin, the soft, delicate cheeks curved into laughing lines.

"Brava! Judith," he cried. "Though I beat thee at running thou canst give me points in dancing. I can stamp a Trenchmore as good as the next one, but when it comes to such twistings and turnings I cut but a sorry figure. Thou'rt lighter than thistledown, and there'll be no better dancing done this day, I trow. But leave off now, for I be starving. Wait, Mother dear; let me fix that bit o' thorn above the door, to keep the witches out. So!"

"That's a good lad! Now, go you in, children, and get your porridge—'tis set on the dresser. We are losing day; it wastes toward noon, and there's naught done. Leave your grandmother and me to dress the house."

The children ran within doors with merry shouts, and the two women looked at each other smilingly. They needed no speech, for each could read the other's heart as 'twere an open book. Then they fell to work, still in silence, sorting out the long vines and twisting them about the supports of the pent-house. They put great branches of May upon the ledges of the windows and bound them by the door, stepping off at a little distance the better to judge of the effect, as Richard Sponer of Chapel Lane, the painter, studieth his work.

They made a comely picture working together in the fresh spring sunshine. The sweet-faced elderly woman, with the silvery hair showing beneath the border of her coif, touched the flowers tenderly, as though they were a part of her own youth. She stepped a little slower than did her companion, and her tall, slender figure was somewhat bowed, but she bore herself with a dauntless mien. The other woman was not quite so tall; she moved with quick, brisk motions, and as she wound the blossoms deftly into sweet-smelling nosegays, she sang in a low, vibrant voice the words of little Judith's song:

"'A branch of May I bring to you,
Before your door it stands.'"

CHAPTER III.

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not deck'd with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be seen; my crown is call'd Content.
Henry VI.

Spirits are not finely touch'd
But to fine issues.
Measure For Measure.

When Master William Shakespeare went up to London to seek his fortune he left his wife and their little ones in his father's home in Henley Street. At that time his father and mother, with three of their children—Joan, a merry-eyed lass of sixteen, Richard, and Edmund—the latter a small lad of five years—were living in the old house. Gilbert, the son next in age to William, was away in Snitterfield, at his Uncle Henry's farm, whither Richard followed him a couple of years later.

There was a warm welcome ready for the little family from those good, true hearts, and the passing years only made the ties of affection stronger. It was very pleasant for the elder Mistress Shakespeare to have the continual companionship of her daughter-in-law, Anne. There was something so lovable about the creature that none could resist her. She had a way of slipping into a body's heart willy-nilly, and taking up her home there. Her low voice and gay laughter were goodly sounds to hear, while her fondness for her children was the touchingest thing in the world. The two women, though they were each a trifle jealous of the other, as is often the case with very worthy women, were drawn closely together by their love for the little ones.

Master John Shakespeare, worried and worn with the sad stress into which his affairs had fallen, had lost much of the jovial cheer which had been so marked a characteristic of his in earlier life. He had grown silent, too—he who had always been so ready with his lively sallies!—and the wish to keep from his fellows was one that increased daily. His was a nature to thrive only in the sunshine; the storms and shadows of life left him sore distressed, hopeless, despairing. He was like a wounded animal seeking the silences to nurse his hurt, and looking thence suspiciously at the world. The turn fortune had taken had embittered him sadly, and he no longer went abroad to mingle in the merrymakings of his towns-people, so that the coming of the children was as if a door had been opened suddenly upon a pleasant place radiant with love and cheer.

It was midsummer when the young family came. Susanna was then a little more than two years old, and the twins a matter of five or six months. From the first the heart of the grandmother, which was always open to children, and indeed to all her kind, warmed especially to the little boy. His resemblance to his father, even at that early age, was very marked, and the woman, as she crooned over the baby in her arms, seemed to be living over the time when her first-born son had lain upon her breast and she had sung the same simple words to him:

"'Lully, lulla by, littell tyne child,
By, by, lullay, lullay by, little tyne child,
By, by, lully, lully.'"

Sometimes the bright eyes would close almost at the first line, and then the sweet voice would cease and the grandmother would fall a-dreaming too, only with open eyes, of that other little one who had grown to man's estate and who was far away amid the din and distractions of a strange city. But the same confident smile would linger on her placid lips. She knew the heart of the man; it was as simple and gentle as the child's had been, and she had no fear that he would fall a prey to ill-doing. She had such absolute trust in him, though she missed him sorely and would fain, for her own sake and the sakes of those about her, wish that he were home again with them all.

At other times, if Baby Hamnet were not minded to sleep, she must needs talk to him in that foolish fashion women have—lopping off their words and twisting them into strange shapes, as if by so doing the small mind can understand a person the easier. Or, if he ought to go to Dreamland, then would she sing that other old song, about that Babe Whose mother's heart was filled with grievous dismay in the lowly stable in the far-away Eastern land:

"'Lulla, la lulla, lulla, lulla bye.
My swete littell babe what meanest thou to cry?
Bee still my blessed babe, though cause thou hast to mourne,
Whose blood most innocent the cruel king hath sworne.
And lo! alas, behold! what slaughter he doth make,
Shedding the blood of infants all, swete Saviour for thy sake.
A king is borne they say, which king that king would kill.
Oh! woe and woeful heavie day when wretches have their will!'"

So would Mistress Shakespeare sing the carol to the end, softly and tenderly, and when the little one had gone to Slumberland she would lay him in the cradle by his sister's side and fall to watching the two sleep-flushed faces. And often her daughter-in-law would cry, half in jest, half in earnest:

"Nay then, my mother, thou'rt all for Hamnet and hast no eyes for my sweet bird, Judith; and as for Susanna, thou givest the child no word. I do protest, la, 'tis not right; hereafter I will keep the little lad myself and thou mayest sing Judith to sleep."

Then the elder woman would laugh in her turn and say:

"I fear not thy threats, sweetheart and right willingly will I sing to Judith. In truth I love her and my little Susanna too; only—only—the boy cometh first because o' his father's sake. Thou'lt humor an old woman lass?"

And for answer Anne Shakespeare would kiss the sweet questioning face, and if Hamnet were awake she would push him crowing into his grandmother's arms and play hy-spy with him over her shoulder, whereat Susanna would join in the sport with her shrill screams and Judith would coo gayly from the cradle. Truly, they were very happy together.

So the months slipped by, and season after season passed uneventfully and quietly to the household in Henley Street. It seemed but yesterday to Mistress Mary Shakespeare that Susanna, on the time of her first coming there, had stood in the door-way, while her father had cut a tiny notch in the wood above her sunny head to mark her height and had put a little 'S' alongside. The mother, Anna, had sat by; looking on with laughing eyes the while she danced baby Judith in the air and she herself held Hamnet; and when his father turned to him and said: "Thou'rt too small to be measured, manikin," she had cried out: "Not so, William, not so; he is as high as my heart." Whereat they had all laughed at her quick protest. And now her words had come true in very deed.

The years had brought still other changes to Henley Street. Master John Shakespeare walked a little slower, and the habit of silence had grown more surely upon him, though with his son's increasing success in London his ebbing fortune was rapidly mending. A look of content had gradually settled upon his wrinkled face, dispelling the harassed expression which had so long disfigured it, and he held his head with something of the confidence he had shown in the days of his own public capacity.

The same gentle trust was written on Mistress Mary Shakespeare's features; the same unflinching bravery of mien