

WILL SHAKESPEARE'S LITTLE LAD.

BY IMOGEN CLARK.

CHAPTER III CONTINUED.

Susanna and Judith, with the other bridesmaids, had gone early to Master William Hart's house, presenting him with a branch of gilded rosemary bound with ribbons, and then had led him forth to the church along the rush-strewn, flower-bedecked way, while Hamnet, with the bridegroom's men, had conducted the bride thither, Hamnet walking nearest to her, because she would have it so. In sooth, she made a winsome bride, with a chaplet of flowers on her bright brown hair, which waved to her waist, her fair face looking forth from the filmy veil which became her vastly! In her hand she bore a branch of rosemary that had been previously dipped in sweet scented water, and her little nephew at her side waved his gilded branch gently to and fro. Just in front of them strode a youth who carried the bride cup, which was filled with wine and decorated with vines and ribbons, and back of them were the musicians playing ever softly.

So they passed along the road, coming at last to Trinity Church, where the doors stood wide and the wedding-chorus greeted their ears. Good Sir Richard Bifield was waiting at the chancel steps, and thither the bridal party walked up the nave, where the wedding-guests were grouped on either side, the won- a pressing forward to see the bride as she passed, and all of them waving their sweet-scented branches of gilded rosemary and bay until the air was heavy with perfume.

When they paused and the vicar had stepped forward, Hamnet, from his place next the groom—for the maidens were standing now with the bride—stole furtive glances about him, and marvelled much why, when it all was so joyous and beautiful, his Grandam Shakespeare should look so sad. His sight was keen enough to discover the tears in her eyes, and he wanted to comfort her, though why she should need comfort at such a time he knew not.

"'Tis because women are not men," the little man mused, "that they act thus. Methinks they're ever like the sky in April, one moment tears and the next all smiles—sad and happy in a breath. There's my Aunt Joan—'twas only 'his morning, when my grandam kissed her, that she fell a weeping, and now how gay she looks, as if she would never shed a tear again." 'Tis passing strange. I must ask father."

He broke off in his reflections as the singing burst forth again, and the newly wedded couple, after the bride-cup had been called for and the customary kiss given, turned from the altar. Mistress Hart stopped for a moment, on her way down the nave, by her mother, and Hamnet, looking on, saw tears not only in his grandmother's eyes, but in his aunt's also, as the two women embraced each other fondly, and the elder said "God bless thee!" while the younger murmured "Amen!"

"'Tis marvellous strange," the boy thought. "'Of a truth I must ask father."

But there was no chance then to seek the desired information, with the people pressing out after the bride and sweeping everyone along. That was surely no time to muse and wonder at the ways of women folk. What a clatter there was! As if the few minutes of enforced silence had but served to oil their tongues the better, and everyone must make up for that bit of quietness. There was more noise abroad than ever came from the new mill-wheel just beyond the church at the foot of Mill Lane. The laughing, chattering guests surged through the open doors and formed into a procession; then they started on the homeward way.

Master and Mistress Hart led the happy company; then came Master John Shakespeare and Mistress Mary, his wife, followed by Master William Shakespeare—come on purpose from London town to be at his sister's wedding—walking with Mistress Anne, his wife, who was clad in a brand new gown as fine as any Court lady would wish to wear, with the ruff about her throat set and coloured with yellow starch, and upon her head a little cap of silver tissue—a gift from her husband—which did augment the soft fairness of her fair right wondrously, while upon her breast she wore the blue bride-laces which, with the favours, were always presented to the guests on such occasions.

Back of them trooped the relatives and friends. Old Mistress Hathaway, with her son Tom, the Henry Shakespeares from Snitterfield, the John Shakespeares from Bridge Street, the Shakespeares from Rowington Hall, the Etkyns, Cornells, Webbs, Lametts, and Greenes; the Cloptons and Combes, graciously friendly, Henry Walker—he that would be alderman some day—bob-nobbin' with the Master Bailiff the Vicar of Trinity arm-in-arm with the master of the Grammar School—Sir John Colton—both deep in some learned disputation, and turning ever and anon for support in their argument to Sir Thomas Hunt, of Luddington, who was walking just behind them. Then came Hercules Underhill and his good wife; Walter Roche and his; Julius Shave, gay and smiling, though every one knew he was wearing the willow for sweet Mistress Hart's sake; the Rogeres, the Sadlers, and many others, old and young; while the children ran on before, or danced along by the sides of their elders, singing and shouting merrily.

And then, almost before they realized it, they had reached their destination, and right in front of them stood the Shakespeares' home, its windows dressed with flowers, and its garden, which swept from the back around the two sides, green and sweet beneath the glowing sun. There were birds twittering in the trim hedge along the street and calling out to their brother-songsters in Nicholas Lane's garden to come and see the happy doings.

Fast upon the home-coming followed the bride-ale and the games and dances. There was nothing but jollity—not a hint of a suspicion of a tear! Hamnet and the other children strayed about the house at first; then, wander-

ing off to the adjacent fields, they played at hoodman-blind, tag, and barley-break, their shouts filling the air with a blithe hubbub. He quite forgot his reflections of the earlier day, but they returned in full force when the time for parting came.

There were tears then in plenty; tears in Grandam Shakespeare's eyes, though her lips were curved into brave smiles; tears in his mother's eyes, though why she should weep he could not tell, when only the moment before she had been laughing with her gossip, Mistress Sadler. Tears, tears, tears in the little bride's eyes, so many that they brimmed over and rolled down her cheeks. Grandfather Shakespeare looked as if he had a sorry pose. Hamnet glanced quickly at his father; whose kind, hazel eyes were bent upon the bride's face; they were very soft and tender and—Hamnet could not say.

It was very strange! He could not see overwell himself, and when Aunt Joan stooped and whispered "Good-by, sweet!" he felt a queer lump rise in his throat. He threw his arms around her, and clung to her as she kissed him. Then he watched her, still surrounded by the bridesmaids and bridesmen, go away hand-in-hand with her husband across the fields to the new home, and somehow—he couldn't see very far. And yet it was a clear evening with such a soft, peaceful after-glow flooding the sky, or he had thought so—but now a mist was rising!

He would ask father. He turned with the question on his lips, but his father had gone with some friends to pass the evening at the Swan and would not be back until long after Hamnet's bed-time. The little lad stifled a sigh; there was no use asking the women folk or grandfather. The house seemed strangely quiet after the gayety, and all the flowers were drooping and dying. The very air was full of sadness, and yet for all that grandmother had looked so sorrowful, she and his mother were talking blithely of the doings of the day, and what this one had worn and what the other, and what had been said. Susanna and Judith were whispering on the settle; he could catch a word now and again—"kirtle," "fernstitch," "bonelace," "my mammet." How girls talked, as if a boy ever cared to listen! Now, if Tom Combe and Francis Collins were only present, there would be something worth hearing. There would be talk of the Armada—one never tired of that desperate sea-fight; or the war in Flanders, look you! or the famous encounter between Sir Guy and Colbrand. And if by any chance those subjects palled, there was that game of prisoners' base the big boys played Saturday evening in the field near the Bankcroft. He patted his big hound, Silver.

"'Thou understandest anyway," he whispered; "and when father cometh back we'll ask him."

In the soft dawn of the next morning, the whole household was astir. Master William Shakespeare was going to London, and must be away by the sun's uprising. After Susanna and Judith had spread the table and the elders had seated themselves, Hamnet, as was his wont, stood at one side and repeated his grace. That finished, he made a low courtesy, and said "Much good may it do you!" and forthwith put the breakfast upon the table, waiting so carefully and attentively upon his elders that the simple meal of eggs and bread and milk, with crisp lettuce from the garden, was soon over. At its end, after he had carried away the empty platters and brushed the crumbs into a 'voider,' Susanna and he removed the cloth, folding it carefully, and then they brought a clean towel and a basin and ewer for washing the hands.

With all that to do, there was no chance to ask questions, though the boy could feel them surging within him. There were so many last words to be said by everyone that his fancies must need wait. He stood quietly by, suppressing his disappointment bravely, but his father, with that wonderful way he had of reading another person's thoughts, looked at the wistful little face and understood that something was troubling the small mind. Yet he gave no sign. He kissed them all farewell; then he mounted the roan champing at the door, and, turning in his saddle, he held out his hand.

"Spring up behind me, little lad," he cried; "and, Sir Silver, stretch thy legs; we'll go a bit toward London together."

"An I might only go all the way," Hamnet whispered, as he clung to the strong figure, and the horse bounded forward through the quiet street.

"Would'st leave them all for me?"

Hamnet glanced at the small group under the pent house; at the old man in his dressing-gown, with his brodered night-cap on his straggling, white hair; at the two women side by side, with their sad faces that were yet smiling, oh, so valiantly; at the little girls waving their hands. He tightened his hold.

"Yea," he answered, with a quick-drawn breath.

"And Silver?"

"He's going, too."

Will Shakespeare laughed.

"Thou hast a ready wit; but wait, my little lad; the years fly quickly. When thou'rt older, thou shalt be with me—"

"All day, and every day?"

"An thou wilt."

"'Tis so long till then; I would the time were now. Methinks the years will be monstrous slow in passing."

"Nay, nay, they will go fast enough, and there is much thou wilt have to do. Thou must grow wise and good, and be merry and gentle wital."

"And what age must I be?"

"I wot not. After the grammar school here, there will be study at Oxford, and then—"

"London and father?"

"Not so fast, not so fast. London an thou wilt, but methinks by that time thy father will be back here in Stratford town in some home of his own. What sayeth thou to the 'Great House,' if fortune smiles? But breathe no word of this; thou art like my second self, and so I speak to thee."

Hamnet pressed his arm closer and the man went on with a smile: "There's no spot like this little town of ours, lad, and thou search the world up and down; nay, not even Italy herself, fair though she be."

There were tears then in plenty; tears in Grandam Shakespeare's eyes, though her lips were curved into brave smiles; tears in his mother's eyes, though why she should weep he could not tell, when only the moment before she had been laughing with her gossip, Mistress Sadler. Tears, tears, tears in the little bride's eyes, so many that they brimmed over and rolled down her cheeks. Grandfather Shakespeare looked as if he had a sorry pose. Hamnet glanced quickly at his father; whose kind, hazel eyes were bent upon the bride's face; they were very soft and tender and—Hamnet could not say.

"Then we'll stay here together."

"But London?"

"I care not for London, an thou be not there."

The man looked back fondly at the small, eager face against his shoulder.

"Say'st thou so, lad; say'st thou so?" he murmured softly, and his eyes were very tender.

At the Swan a number of travellers, already mounted, were waiting before the door. They greeted the newcomers right cheerily, and after a few minutes spent in idle talk the little cavalcade set out on its journey, clattering down Bridge Street and over the great bridge, and thence into the road which led to Shipston and Oxford, and so winding on to the wonder metropolis itself. Hamnet still continued with his father, an observant listener of the conversation carried on between his elders.

But all too soon Will Shakespeare dropped behind the others. His horse stepped slowly. There was no danger of falling off, and yet Hamnet clung very close, and the man put his hand over the little, straining fingers that were clasped above his heart as if he would not let them go. So they rode for a short space in silence.

The sun was up, and from the roadside bushes and the thinning trees there came the sound of gay bird-voices, but neither man nor boy heeded them. Suddenly the horse stopped altogether, and the strong fingers undid the little clung-on ones tenderly. The bridle-rein lay on the roan's neck, and the man turned and took the child in his arms, kissing him fondly.

"Thou must go home," he said; "nay then, I like a sunny face. So! that's my own true lad. Cheer the others too, the women-folk and the little maids. That is the charge I give thee."

Hamnet winked back his tears and kissed his father in return, then he jumped to the ground and stood leaning against the quiet horse. Silver came close to his side.

"Do men never weep, father?" the boy asked, wistfully.

"Not often. We must be brave, and the best way is to be masters of ourselves; and yet 'tis no harm, sweet, when we are parting from those we love. 'Tis nature's due. Only it makes it easier if we—being the stronger ones—keep a smiling face."

"But thou look'st sorry now."

"Ay, and I am sorry."

"And though thine eyes be not wet, belike there's a lump in thy throat as there is in mine."

"Even so, little lad. I must hie me to some wiseman to be rid of it. And thou must do the same. Good Doctor Trust or Cheer—thou'lt know their dwelling. And I'll tell thee a secret, too: the trees and the birds have comfort in their keeping for those who go and those who stay."

"But why doth the choke come in our throats when we do say farewell?"

"'Tis because we love each other, dear heart. And now stand back; I must not linger."

"Thou'lt come again?"

"Again and again and again. God be with thee, little lad."

"God be with thee, sweet Father."

CHAPTER IV.

A grandam's name is little less in love than is the dotting little of a mother.

Richard III.

Since that August morning almost ten months had gone by. May had been ushered in with all the usual rites and had slipped away into June. The fields round about Stratford were ablaze with gorgeous scarlet poppies amidst the yellowing grain; wild flowers painted the dark-green thickets with vivid splashes of color, and bits of leathery happiness made the arching trees along the roads and in the orchard bowers of song.

The river, too, between its willow-guarded banks, raised a blithe voice as it crawled slowly by, with never a hint in its laughing murmurs of those fearful times when it had overlapped its bounds and had swept, like some cruel monster, upon the little town, carrying disaster in its train—a trusty friend turned on the sudden into an implacable foe! But in this golden June weather it sang so sweetly among the sedges, it were unkind, surely, to remember its former ill-doing. Not one of those living in Stratford town but loved to ramble by its side as it wound through the meadows, gleaming with a thousand laughing eyes in the sunlight, or stole away demure and quiet to where the overhanging trees made an almost impenetrable darkness. It was pleasant, too, to wander within sound of its cheery voice to Bishop's Hampton and Charlecote, or to stroll past Trinity and down Mill Lane to the path leading to Luddington, or to cross the little foot-bridge and roam at will through the lush fields and along the narrow, overhung pathway of Weir Brake. So many places there were to visit throughout the summer days, it were no easy task to make a choice.

But of all the lovely ways leading out of the same town, the way to Shottery was the loveliest to the thinking of the young Shakespeares and to the heart of their mother. The small hamlet was a short mile from Stratford, and thither the children made constant pilgrimages, traversing the little path that wound across the meadows, now beneath the shade of stately elms through which the sunlight flickered in shifting patterns, like fine net-work at their feet, now by tangled hedges where the flowers nodded a welcome and the birds sought to detain them with their songs, or again it straggled out into the open with the wide sky all about them.

When Shottery was reached the path was exchanged for the familiar lane, and there before them stood the object of their quest. It was a picturesque little cottage built of wood and plaster, ribbed with massive timbers—crossed and visible all along its front—and covered with a substantial roof of thatch. The wicket hung loosely under the shade of a thorn, and, once inside the gate, a line of stones led through the garden to the house-door. To the children, fond as they were of the house and its inmates, and certain always of a welcome that fitted them with a sense of their own importance, it was ever a delight to them to find the door made last. Mistress Hathaway, waiting eagerly within for a glimpse of the young life which their gay voices had heralded along the lane

never in her impatience went to greet them on its threshold. She knew the pleasure it gave them to pull the wooden latch themselves and have the door open at their touch. Each one in turn, when a tiny child, had learned the secret: "Pull the string and you'll get in!"

Long before they had reached the stature to grasp the bit of wood which was nailed on the door, some kindly arms had raised them to the coveted height, and one chubby hand had taken hold of the wood proudly while the other had pulled the bobbin. Over and over again the door had responded to that "open sesame," and on each occasion joyous gurgles of merriment filled the air. They had gradually outgrown such expressions of delight, though the pleasure of seeking and obtaining admittance at the old door still remained. Susanna, now that she was thirteen, liked to pull the bobbin in a grown-up fashion, as a Court lady on a tour of country visits would be minded to do, while Judith, who alternately aped her sister's or her brother's ways, was now a fine dame approaching the door with mincing steps and much smoothing out of her gown and patting of her hands, as if, forsooth, the latter were covered with fair-scented gloves; or she would swagger up like any saucy rogue, and rain some rousing thwacks upon the wooden surface before discovering the string. She made them sound almost as loud as Hamnet's lusty strokes, so that Gillian would murmur, in the buttery:

"Body o' me! an I could catch that boy—"

Shottery was as familiar to the children as the town where they lived with their father's people. They loved the lanes between the mossy banks where the little brooks came rushing and tinkling along, their gleeful voices making the green silence alive with sound. Oh! those wonderful Shottery lanes, with their wealth of blossoms which they could not hide, nor did not wish to hide, from those loving young eyes! The children knew well where to find 'the ladies' smocks all silver white,' the primrose with its wrinkled leaves, the 'violets dim,' and 'the daffodils that come before the swallow darses.' They knew, too, where, as soon as the birds had paired, the arum—their mother's favorite—lifted its pointed, black-spotted leaves from the sides of the ditches. She would often seek it with them, and they never tired of hearing her tell how she had sought it in the long ago with their father, and what he had told her concerning its way of growing. And they would fall a-laughing with her at the dismay she had caused her neighbors, who, wise in herb-lore, declared the arum to be poisonous; and when she had borne some away with her, had said she was bewitched, because no ill effects followed.

But dear as the lanes were to Susanna and Judith, they appeared more directly to Hamnet's dreamer nature. He asked no greater pleasure than to roam through them at all seasons, with Silver at his side, peering now into one flower's face, now into another's, searching the tangle of green for some shy beauties, or, when the season was far advanced, finding some belated blossoms hidden away where they made second summer for themselves, or, in the whiteness of winter, guessing at the sleeping things locked close in the heart of nature.

The birds, too, were his friends. The robin-redbreast, that haunts the lanes of Shottery, was as safe from harm at his hands as though it were not 'the bird of God,' and the other little brothers of the air had naught to fear at his approach. He listened to their songs and recognized each voice. That was a concert worth hearing! The duncock, from its home in the hedge, uttered its tender song, now loud, now subdued, and yet exceeding mellow; the 'black-cap' joined in with his deep, rich strain; the 'white-throat' fluttered from his gauzy nest in the sweet brier bush and balanced upon a spray, his little breast swelling with music; the 'proud-tailor,' from the tangled, weed-choked thicket, where grew the thistles which formed his chief diet, sang his part; and the other lane-birds, the thrush, the chaffinch, greenfinch, yellowhammer, and the modest little wren, each had its note to add. From the copses came the sound of the nicker, tap-tap-tapping at the trees, and the mournful cries of the queecer.

Much of his knowledge of birds, Hamnet had derived from his father when together they roamed about the country, the tall man making stories for the glad listening ears of the little lad at his side. It was an additional zest to the child to study the ways of his hered friends, that he might thus be enabled to tell his father on each recurring visit. He could imitate their notes with an exactness that was well-nigh marvellous and he would often answer the different calls as if the greetings were intended alone for him.

It so befell that that June, in the year 1596, Anne Shakespeare and her children were staying a few days at Shottery, much to the satisfaction of good Mistress Hathaway, who was apt to grow lonely and a trifle peevish at times. If she could have had her will she would have kept the little ones with her always—a proceeding to which the grandmother in town would not hearken for an instant.

"La, Anne," Mistress Hathaway said, as she and her daughter sat together at the close of day, "I see no reason why thou and the children should not tarry here till Michaelmas. Mistress Shakespeare hath her good man for company, though ill fortune hath soured him sorely—an honest soul as thou'dst find on a summer's day, and a kind, but thriftless—thriftless, and over fond o' show! Marry! 'tis a grievous world to see. He had ever a pretty turn to his wit, and well I remember the praise he gave me for my cowslip wine. 'Twould have painted my cheeks tarnation had I not known that no better was ever brewed in all Warwickshire. Od's piteerkins! I should have fallen on such evil times—a man with so ready a tongue in 's head, and such an incrimination o' good things. But alack! alack! time hath changes for us all, and he's grown the silentest man in the vernal world."

"I faith, not so, good Mother. He goeth not much abroad, as once he did,

but for long there was the fear o' the ill his creditors would work him, and now that that fear's ta'en away, he hath fallen into the habit o' staying at home."

"Ay! and into the habit o' being mum, I promise thee. That's what over-much staying by one's hearth breeds—silence—silence. The tongue rusts from lack o' use! An the stream be dry by the mill, then 'tis vain carrying prist thither. The last time I met John Shakespeare he'd but a word to say: 'Give ye good-morrow, good Mistress Hathaway.' That was sufficiency, and so he passed on. Soul o' me! I wot well the encounters were went to have when he'd chat and chat, so 't would be hard to put in even a 'hem,' and always some mention o' the cowslip wine before he went. And now, I might never have made 'the best in Warwickshire'—'twas his very phrase—ay! and still remain. Susanna, now that she was thirteen, liked to pull the bobbin in a grown-up fashion, as a Court lady on a tour of country visits would be minded to do, while Judith, who alternately aped her sister's or her brother's ways, was now a fine dame approaching the door with mincing steps and much smoothing out of her gown and patting of her hands, as if, forsooth, the latter were covered with fair-scented gloves; or she would swagger up like any saucy rogue, and rain some rousing thwacks upon the wooden surface before discovering the string. She made them sound almost as loud as Hamnet's lusty strokes, so that Gillian would murmur, in the buttery:

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"Tut! tut! and that before his own good wife, too."

"Oh! my Mother Shakespeare was not by; she had gone a walk with Hamnet."

"Hm! But very like he hath said it in her hearing oft. Dost think he hath? Men have no concernment! I would not have the creature's feelings hurt, and yet Mistress Shakespeare's pies are too pale—she's chary w' the saffron. Methinks the taste o' mine is vastly inferior; but go to—when thou goest back to Stratford I'll give thee a bottle o' wine for Master Shakespeare; he was ever a man o' most unwarrantable taste."

The two women were sitting side by side on an oaken bench in the arbour. It was a favorite place with Anne, for here, years before, she and her young lover used to meet. A walk, shut in by tall box, led round the garden to the arbour, which was also formed of box and was screened from view by a high hedge. 'Twas a quiet spot to rest in, with one's work and one's thoughts of these happy, happy days, while just without the flowers nodded in the sun and made the air sweet with their perfume. Anne drew her needle in and out of the fine fabric which she was embroidering with Coventry blue, a little smile dancing in her lowered eyes. Her mother leaned forward curiously and took up an end of the linen between her thumb and forefinger.

"What gear is this?" she asked, after a moment.

"'Tis a shirt for Hamnet, my Mother."

"Hamnet—Hamnet—Hamnet," grumbled the old woman; "I do detest, you be all stark mad about the lad. The other day when I saw Mistress Shakespeare she was knitting a pair o' stockings o' finest yarn, w' quirks and clocks about the ankles fit for a lord. 'Who be these for?' quoth I. 'For my dear Hamnet,' quoth she. And at that I was exceeding wroth. I'd a pair in my poke that I'd knit speciously for the lad out o' good Warwickshire wool, spun by these very hands, and all my work had gone for naught. My cake was dough! What! an thou lettest the lad go tricked in such fashion he'll have no care for plainer things, and that's the certain o' it! I'll not have my gift scorned, and so I'll e'en purvey it elsewhere."

"Not so, sweet Mother; the stockings must be for Hamnet, as thou first intended, and right glad will he be to have them. The ones his Grandam Shakespeare is making are for his Sunday best."

"I trow so. La, mine are but everyday affairs; he'll not use them over-much."

"In sooth ne will, six times as much as the others, when thou remember'st there are six common days to the one Sunday. Thou'lt give them him; there's a good grandam! But think not I favour him more than the little wenches. I'm e'en making them smocks set about w' cut work."

"Vanity! Vanity! A touch o' broidery on a boy's shirt comes not amiss, but a maid's head is soon turned with such gawds. Where didst get this stuff? 'Tis most marvellous fine; the greatest thread therein is not so big as the smallest hair. Was it from London?"

"Nay, then, I got it May day from the pedler who had it in his pack. He said it came from France from a place called Cambrai—a heathenish place, marry, where they speak no English. But be the folks, heathen or no heathen, they make right pleasing stuff. 'Tis mightily favored at the Court; the Queen herself hath her ruffs made therefrom."

"An thou copiest the Queen and her wardrobe thy husband will be sore put to getting money for thy extravagances. 'Tis out o' all whooping that a daughter o' mine should flitter her substance like this. Thou'lt be wearing all crimson next! But to my ways are town ways, and every gossip must go better pranked than her neighbor. 'Twould never have happened, I warrant me, an thou had'st lived the year round at Shottery. Here, thou couldst save thy angels; here there be no foldersols."

"La, an thou chid'st me so, I'll e'en give the parlet I've made thee o' this same cambric to my dear mother Shakespeare; 'twill become her won."

"A parlet, say'st thou? Now blessings on thy heart for it! Hast brought it w' thee? Nay, nay, I detest, I spoke but in mirth."

"Ay, good mother, the parlet is in my chamber, but 'tis not finished. Susanna hath besought me to let her make it brave with broidery."

"She'll not spoil it, will she? 'Twere a pity, and it such fine stuff and not it's like in Shottery village. I'll be in t'rits and frights till it be done. Prythee now, say thou wilt do the finishing thyself, dear wench. The child is over young to be trusted w' such work."

"Fear not, my mother; I'd trust Sue to make a forepart for the Queen. There's not a lass anywhere that is handier with her needle. She can do you fernstitch—"

"And Spanish, rosemary, and queen—that's four—besides cross-stitch,

chain, and newback," cried a laughing voice.

"Out upon thee, thou young baggage!" Mistress Hathaway exclaimed, turning with a start, to be confronted by Susanna's dimpling cheeks. "Out upon thee! We've an adage here about listeners."

"It came not true then, for I heard naught but good, as how it should be else when my sweet mother speaks o' me, ay, and my grandam too?"

"Forget it all—forget it all! 'Praise to the face is open disgrace."

"'Tis passing strange," sighed little Judith, as she nestled against her grandmother, "that praise should be so sweet! I can always do thrice as well when some one cries 'How nice!' And when I go abroad it maketh the day sunnier if my good mother kisseth me and saith 'I'm her own dear mouse, and there's not a prettier little lass in Warwickshire.'"

"Tilly vally! Is this thine upbringing? Pretty quotha! What's pretty? Thou shouldst not know the insignificance o' the word. I marvel, Anne, thou art so fond! The child is over young for such thoughts—she should not be told—'tis all too soon a maid findeth her way to the looking-glass."

"Is't that we be born so, Grandam? Verily, no one hath told me what pretty means. My Grandmother Shakespeare and my dear mother are pretty, and Susanna too, and methinks thou'rt pretty and that thy lips be smiling as sweetly now. But Gillian is not pretty, and 'tis better to say that softly, that she may not hear. She's very ugly to look upon, and yet she maketh such brave, brave marchpane. And so I tell her—there's no harm in that, is there, Grandam? It pleaseth her so."

"No harm at all. Marry, thou'rt a wise counsellor and a pretty one. A little injudicious praise is good sometimes; but I pray Gillian's head be not turned; she needeth watching—she needeth watching, and thou'dst never believe how long I was teaching her to make that same marchpane. By night and day still was I at it, and e'en now must I caution her that she putreth not in too much sugar. The wench leadeth me a very frampold life. Well-a-day! I must bear what God will with and never repine, though it giveth us sore heartache. But go to, I must show thee how to make some kick-shaws. Would'st like to learn?"

"So much, so very much. When shall it be? Now?"

"Nay, not now, for 'tis nigh trencher-time. Thou'lt get naught but frumty this even."

"I like thy frumty."

"And mayhap a spoonful o' custard. I'll give thee destructions in the morning."

"I shall not sleep with the thinking o' it; and Susanna must help. Wilt thou, sweet Sue? And madam mother must not know until it be done. Shall it be—"

There was a long whisper in Mistress Hathaway's ear, followed by a peal of laughter.

"Susanna doth know already how to make so many things," Judith went on, nodding over at her sister.

"Ay, Susanna is a good housewife," her mother said, smiling fondly, "as thou wilt be, my little mouse, when thou hast led Dame Perrot's charge."

"And how much longer doth the schooling last?"

"Only this summer, sweet Grandmother. I be eleven now and too old for school. Already I can do divers goodly stitches; not so many as Sue, for she knoweth more than she said just now; and not so smooth, but that will come, they say. I've made a gown, too, for my mammet, though that was not done in school. There I work my sampler, and good Mistress Perrot praised it before all the others. And I can read a little, though I must e'en go slow over the bigger words and write—hm! not overwell. Mistress Perrot doth oft chide me because I roll my tongue about when I make the letters, but 'tis the greatest help in this vernal world."

"The greatest help! pow-wow! Who ever heard o' such a thing? What say'st thou, Sue?"

The older girl was seated on the arbour step, with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting in the hollow formed by her hands. She looked up, as her grandmother addressed her, with a little frown upon her brow.

"Why, I tell Jule 'tis arrant nonsense, but she will still be talking. I mind her no more than summer flies; there need be no such pother about writing—'tis easy enow. But, Grandam, I think it is not just that girls should learn so little. I'd like to go to school longer and read books and books. I want to learn the tongues as Hamnet doth—"

"Tut! tut! one tongue is enow for a woman; it serveth her better than a man's doth any day, w' all his requirements. The parson doth ever chide us for overmuch talking. Thou'rt wrong, Susanna, to want more learning. Learning is a parlous thing for one o' thy sex. Go to! thou canst read a little and write a little, and that's more, I' faith, than I can do, and I haven't found the world a hard place to get on in these three score years and ten. 'Tis right for men to be candle-wasters, an they have the wit; but, hark'ee now, who'd look after the puddings and the meats, an the women aped their masters? Let the girls keep away from books and learn to bake and brew and sew, say I; schooling is not for them."

"Nay, then, Grandam, I see not why I should not study the same as boys do. 'Twould be wondrous pleasant, methinks, to be able to read the books that are printed in London town. The Queen now is very learned."

"The Queen is—the Queen!"

"The Queen is just a woman, after all."

"Peace, peace, thou speaketh treason. She is the Lord's anointed."

"In truth, I would not be unmanerly to thee, Grandam, but she is a mere woman—a plain woman, my father saith."

"Thy father's tongue will bring him into mischief and to the Tower, an he be not careful. Many have been clapped there for less than that! Speak not so loud, I do beseech thee. Here's Gillian come to reform us: 'tis supper-time. I